ELVIS PRESLEY

Sunrise

If one *really* had to pick a single place and date as the Birth of Rock & Roll, it might as well be a Memphis, Tennessee, on July 5, 1954. That hot summer night found Elvis Presley, Scotty Moore and Bill Black recording at Sam Phillips' Sun Records studio, struggling through a country ballad and trying to figure out why nothing seemed to be coming together. Tense and frustrated, the band took a break from recording and launched into a frenzied, clowning rave up of an old blues song to let off steam. Elvis threw off his inhibitions and tore into Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "**That's All Right**" like a schoolboy smashing a window. Following his lead, Bill slapped and jumped all over his standup bass while Scotty fired off lowdown blues guitar licks that would have gotten him fired from the country band he and Bill played in. Sam burst through the control room door, asked what they were doing and told the slightly embarrassed trio to "do whatever it was again" so they could put it on tape.

To his great credit, Sam Phillips recognized the future when he heard it. For years he had recorded some of the great Memphis bluesmen, and for years he had repeated what is now rock's most famous line: "If only I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a million dollars." Suddenly there He was, that "white man with a Negro feel," and suddenly it seemed so obvious and natural. The fusion of white and black—country and blues—that had seemed impossibly remote just a few minutes earlier was now standing right in front of him having the time of his life. It is wonderfully appropriate that this crucial version of rock & roll was born in the spirit of fun and letting loose. In one spontaneous, unconscious moment Elvis reached into his soul and musical heritage and turned the old into the stunningly new. While the East Coast version of rock & roll developed gradually and with some discernible logic out of rhythm & blues, the sprawling, diverse musical traditions of the South exploded into rock & roll in one fiery blast.

Not that it was a Shot Heard 'round the World. It would be 18 months before mainstream America surrendered to Elvis, but it was all there that day in July—all the urgency, excitement and liberating freedom of rock & roll. Had that strange boy with the pink pants and sideburns simply gone back to driving a truck, "That's All Right" would still be a remarkable, revelatory record. Instead, he became the King of Rock & Roll, and the record was nothing less than revolutionary.

Elvis and Us

Young Elvis Presley remains rock's most indelible image, eternally young, hip and inspiring despite the tragic mess he made of his later life. The appearance of Elvis was *the* Moment for the rock era, perfectly timed, now timeless. Rock & roll would have happened—was already happening—without him, but it would have been very different and would never have reached the spectacular heights and had the sweeping impact that it did. Elvis was far greater than the sum of his singles: he was rock's first larger-than-life Hero, and with him began the shared dreams and personal identification that have shaped pop culture ever since. The message of Elvis was It's the Singer, not the Song. To dress

like Elvis or affect his sneering self-confidence or hang his poster in your bedroom meant more than "I like his music." In Elvis millions of young people found more than a new entertainer: they found themselves, or at least an idealized image of themselves that stood in stark, liberating contrast to the repressed atmosphere of 1950's America. Bob Dylan recalled that hearing Elvis for the first time "was like busting out of jail."[i] Or as fellow fan Springsteen put it, "It was like he came along and whispered a dream in everybody's ear and then we dreamed it."[ii]

Elvis gave rock's first generation a standard-bearer in the battle against the mainstream—against Perry Como, Doris Day and Mom & Dad's other favorites, and against Pat Boone, the Crew Cuts and the rest of the clean-cut covers crowd passing itself off as "rock & roll." Had America lived up to its own ideals, of course, it would not have taken a white performer to lead the charge, but the stark realities of the 1950's assured that no black artist could have the wide appeal, music industry support and access to the media that Elvis enjoyed. That blunt fact is cause for both condemnation and celebration—condemnation of the *need* for an "Elvis," and celebration that one appeared.

The sheer force of Elvis' popularity and talent broke through previously impenetrable barriers and forced rock & roll down the mainstream's throat. He gave rock a center of gravity and source of momentum and single-handedly created the context that made it possible to talk about rock as something more than a "passing fad for rhythm & blues." While he was at his peak rock exploded with and around him. When he "retired" to the army and the movies, it started to whither: without an overriding force like Elvis to keep things moving in the early sixties, rock was at the mercy of *American Bandstand* and the "teen idol" pretenders to the throne. The audience scattered, waiting, as it turned out, for the Beatles to shape rock's second generation as Elvis had the first.

Elvis never really reclaimed his throne after leaving for the army, but he never relinquished it either. Through all the passing years and changing times, a central fact remains unchanged: there's only one King of Rock & Roll, and that's Elvis.

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[i]Dylan quote from August, 1987 *US* magazine.
[ii]Greil Marcus, "Dead Elvis, " (1991; New York: Doubleday), pg. 129.

Elvis and the South

Elvis Aron Presley was born on January 8, 1935 in Tupelo, Mississippi. (Elvis later added an extra "a" to his middle name. His twin brother, Jessie Garon, died at birth.) Elvis grew up an only child, surrounded by as much love and pampering as the family's resources would allow, which wasn't much—Vernon and Gladys Presley were desperately poor. In 1948, tired of barely scraping by in Tupelo, the family moved to Memphis and settled into the dreary Lauderdale Courts public housing project. They did not find much of the better life they'd sought in the city, however, and by the time he finished high school Elvis had already begun a series of dead-end jobs and was settling into a life that seemed to offer little beyond more hard times with some fun along the way.

Elvis was, by all accounts, a painfully shy and introverted youth who revered his mother and treated his elders with humble deference. He was also a high school rebel who wore long sideburns, slicked-back hair and outrageous, hepcat clothes from the black stores on Beale Street that made him stand out like the sore thumb he already felt he was. Years before he made his first record, Elvis was already creating the image that would both project him to and protect him from the world. First as a poor rural kid in the big city and later as a hillbilly southerner trying to make it in mainstream America, Elvis' basic stance—which became rock & roll's basic stance—was that of the Outsider, a little awkward and out of place, desperately wanting acceptance but determined to win that acceptance on his own terms.

Looking back, it seems almost inevitable that so many of rock's Founding Fathers came from the South, with its rich legacy of contrasting cultures and musical styles. Country music was everywhere, of course, and all roads and all the dreams of young white musicians led to Nashville and the *Grand Ole Opry*. The South was also home to the blues, however, and to a fringe element of crazed rednecks who were fascinated by the blues and bold enough to try creating their own version. Although it is certainly true that the South of the fifties was severely segregated and rife with racial hatred, on a practical day-to-day level, southerners—especially *poor* southerners—of both races intermingled much more closely and with a much deeper awareness of each other than their counterparts in the North. That awareness extended to the music, and a good many white southerners of Elvis' generation felt that the emotional depth and earthy sensuality of the blues and R&B spoke more directly to their youthful energy and frustrations than the traditional values and emotional restraints of country music. The fact that, given the racial climate, it was "forbidden fruit" made it all the more exciting. Adopting black musical styles and other aspects of black culture, such as wild "cat clothes" and jive slang ("Go cat go!"), helped to give expression to their own feelings of alienation and their own desire to be different. Although rockabilly is often called—and was—a fusion of blues and country, the "country" part of the equation was simply a reflection of the rockabillies' heritage and natural musical accents. What made it different and exciting was their attempt to mimic the blues and sound "black": the defining musical traits, image and outsider stance of rockabilly drew heavily from black music and culture.[i]

Gospel music, black and white, was also a big part of the South's musical spectrum and an important influence on Elvis and rockabilly. Gospel styles ranged from quietly devotional to joyous and celebratory, but fast or slow, quiet or loud, the crucial ingredient was a heartfelt emotion—singing as if your very life and immortal soul

depended on it. Singing in church was Elvis' first musical memory, and gospel music remained a part of his repertoire throughout his career. For poor southerners like Elvis, church was a place to let your feelings out, to escape your troubles for an hour or two and sing of a promised land where all your sufferings will be rewarded—to sing with exactly the sense of release and liberation that Elvis brought to his Sun recordings.

The native blues, gospel and country music of the South spoke with a direct honesty and real-life authenticity that was lacking in the pop music or even the more sophisticated rhythm & blues from the North. There was a strong regional identity in the music that found its way into rock & roll as well ("rockabillies" were "rockin' hillbillies," after all). Inasmuch as early rock & roll was an emotionally direct and authentic "folk" music, it owes much to its southern roots. The raw, rough-edged music of Elvis, Jerry Lee, Carl Perkins, Little Richard, Buddy Holly and other giants of rock's first wave simply could not have come from the North.

With all this in mind, we find young Elvis walking into Sam Phillips' studio in the summer of 1953 to make a record as a present for his mother. On that day, Elvis chose to record two Ink Spots ballads in the style of his idol—that epitome of the pop establishment, Dean Martin(!) For all his southern roots, it's important to note that unlike, say, Carl Perkins or Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis also loved mainstream popular music and dreamed of crooning like Dean Martin and becoming a movie star, and that his Sun recordings include versions of pop chestnuts like "Blue Moon," "I Love You Because" and "I'll Never Let You Go" side-by-side with the blues and country songs. In essence, Elvis had a pop voice and a pop musical sensibility that drew on his love of country, blues and gospel to form an entirely new conception of "pop." And for all his celebrated shyness and self-deprecating manner, he had grand pop dreams and ambitions that heightened his impatience with lesser classifications ("C&W," "R&B") and fueled his—and rock's—triumphant assault on the pop charts and popular culture. By the time he first set foot in a studio, Elvis was a uniquely balanced bundle of contradictions, and a musical time bomb waiting to explode.

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[i]The 1960's rock "counterculture" employed an equally spirited appropriation of black culture to articulate its stance as Outsiders oppressed by the Establishment. Much of the language and imagery ("brother," soul handshakes, power salutes, etc.) were borrowed from the black community and civil rights movement (with a dose of American Indian imagery—love beads, hippie "tribes"—thrown in for good measure).

The Sun Years: 1954-55

Sun Records was a relatively small-time operation that had a huge impact on rock & roll. It's owner and operator, **Sam Phillips** (born 1923), is a legendary figure in his own right. With a roster of artists that included Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich and Roy Orbison, along with many of the great southern blues artists, Phillips' importance to the development of rock & roll cannot be overstated. Simply discovering those artists would have been enough to secure his place in history, but all of them went on to make some of the very best—if not *the* best—music of their careers with Phillips at the controls.

Phillips genuinely loved the music he recorded and believed in his artists, and they, in turn, believed in and respected him. He had a great knack for helping his artists discover their own unique style and hidden talents, and he fostered an air of casual camaraderie that helped make inspired "accidents" like "That's All Right" possible. As Carl Perkins later recalled, "You just forgot about making a record and tried to show him. I'd walk out on a limb, I'd try things I knew I couldn't do, and then have to work my way out of it. I'd say 'Mr. Phillips, that's terrible.' He'd say 'That's original.' I'd say, 'But it's just a big original mistake.' And he said, 'That's what Sun records *is*!'"[i]

Memphis was a hotbed of blues talent at the beginning of the 1950's, with a vibrant club scene on Beale Street, where Elvis soaked up the sights and sounds he would soon mimic, and a well-established presence of black radio station stations that kept blues, R&B and gospel sounds just a flick of the dial away from the *Grand Ole Opry* broadcasts. Sam Phillips opened the Memphis Recording Service in 1950 to provide an outlet for the city's great blues and R&B talent, and made some of the first recordings by B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Elmore James, Ike Turner, James Cotton, Junior Parker, Walter Horton and Rufus Thomas. After first leasing his recordings to outside labels (the classic "Rocket 88," for example, was issued by Chess Records), he began his own **Sun Records** label in 1952. Although he was painfully aware of the prejudice that limited its commercial potential, Phillips loved black music and realized that it had an intensity and vitality that was sorely lacking in the stagnant pop music of the time. Now if only he could find a white artist who could capture that same drive and spirit...

Meanwhile, to help finance his blues recordings, Phillips continued the Memphis Recording Service's other functions: mobile recordings and an in-studio, do-it-yourself operation that let anyone off the street come in, pay $4 and walk out with his own record. In the summer of 1953, Elvis walked in to do just that, after many long minutes of pacing the sidewalk in front of the studio to work up his nerves. After witnessing the spectacle, Sam's bemused office manager, Marion Keisker, took Elvis' payment and asked him who he sounded like and what type of song he wanted to record. The shy teenager politely—and prophetically—replied, "I don't sound like nobody," then recorded "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin" to his own guitar accompaniment.

Sam Phillips sensed something different about the nervous but sincere young singer—something promising enough to prompt him to make his own copy of the recordings for future reference. It certainly wasn't the magnetic charisma that Elvis would soon be known for, as Phillips later recalled: "Elvis Presley probably innately was the most introverted person that [ever] came into that studio. He didn't go to this little club and pick and grin. All he did was sit with his guitar on the side of the bed at home.

I don't think he even played on the front porch."[ii] Elvis was a fully-realized product of his own imagination: he never "jammed" with friends or sang with a band before coming to Sun, and he invented a look for himself that invited years of ridicule before becoming the Look of a generation. Like so many other lonely and alienated young people, Elvis created a fantasy world for himself and an idealized image of what he wanted to be. Unlike all others, he made that dream real, forcing the music to bend to his vision and creating a wholly original style in the process.

The Sun Recordings

Elvis was in the back of Sam's mind for nearly a year before he was finally called for a real audition. Phillips hooked him up with guitarist **Scotty More** and bassist **Bill Black**—the other heroes of the Sun Sessions—and began the search for the right song and the right style for the young truck driver. The search ended—and the future began—abruptly on July 5 when the little band launched into "That's All Right."

The group reconvened the next evening, July 6, and recorded again, now experimenting with and defining a style that hadn't existed—even in their wildest dreams—just 24 short hours earlier. After "That's All Right," Sam, Elvis, Scotty and Bill knew they were breaking new ground with every step, and the excitement and enthusiasm of Elvis' Sun recordings reflects that sense of discovery. Existing rehearsal tapes and outtakes show they were constantly experimenting with the tempo, style and feel of the songs, and mixing up old styles to create new possibilities. At the end of a slow, bluesy rehearsal of "**Blue Moon of Kentucky**," for example, Sam can be heard saying, "fine, man... hell, that's different, that's a pop song now!" A bluegrass classic by Bill Monroe, "Blue Moon of Kentucky" was chosen for the flipside of "That's All Right," though the fast, aggressive released version was completely different from the early rehearsals, reflecting the anything goes atmosphere at Sun, and establishing the pattern of blues-country pairings that was used for the remainder of Elvis' Sun singles.

Elvis never really wrote a song of his own, but at his best he reworked and revitalized the songs he sang so thoroughly that he might as well have written them. He ignored the lamenting overtones of Crudup's original "That's All Right," and turned Junior Parker's dirge-like "Mystery Train" into a celebration. (Parker mourns the fact that the train "took my baby, and it's gonna do it again," while Elvis' train "took my baby, but it NEVER WILL AGAIN.") In similar fashion, Roy Brown's classy jump-blues "Good Rockin' Tonight" became a battle cry for a new era, while Arthur Gunter's timid "Baby Let's Play House" was transformed into a musical and sexual cataclysm.

Elvis' "**Milkcow Blues Boogie**" is a combination of an old Kokomo Arnold blues standard and "Brain Cloudy Blues," a western swing number by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. Although loosely a blues "cover," his inspired vision of the song is as far from the blues as his "Blue Moon of Kentucky" was from bluegrass, though he begins "Milkcow Blues Boogie" with a playful false start of slow, straight blues. Elvis cuts the intriguing opening short with a challenge to the band: "Hold it fellas! That don't move me. Let's get real, real GONE for a change." He then plunges into the song for real, with a hopped-up tempo and an daredevil vocal performance that erases the false start from memory and mocks the notion that he, Elvis Presley, could ever be confined to old-time blues any more than he could confine himself to the staid bluegrass of Bill Monroe. "I don't sound like nobody," indeed. Elvis' Sun Sessions were a triumph of instinctive, self-

creating talent, and are pure rock & roll—the purest rock & roll, standing at the crossroads of the pre-rock past and the decades of music they helped spawn. Elvis reinvented himself in one blinding flash, and fused his influences so seamlessly that total effect of the Sun recordings is that of a slate wiped clean, where anything and everything was possible.

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[i]Peter Guralnick, liner notes for *Elvis: The Sun Sessions*, (RCA Compact Disc, 1987).
[ii]Guralnick, *Sun Sessions* liner notes.

Rockabilly Style Traits

The unbridled energy and raw sound of Elvis' Sun recordings formed the blueprint for the distinctly southern brand of rock & roll called **rockabilly**. "Keep it simple" was Sam Phillips' first rule: no horns, strings, superfluous instruments or even background singers to get in the way of the emotion and spontaneity. Everything was stripped to the barest essentials, yet the records sound amazingly full, thanks largely to Phillips' tape-delay "slapback" echo, in which the recorded voice or instrument was immediately fed back on itself through a tape delay circuit. The split-second lag, coupled with the natural ambiance of the Sun studio, created the "echo" and a focused, magnified sound (unlike the distant, "empty concert hall" sound of normal "reverb") that became Phillips' trademark, much copied but never quite duplicated anywhere else.[i]

The full sound of the Sun recordings is even more impressive in light of the fact that there was no drummer in the band for the majority of his stay at Sun, in keeping with the drum-less tradition of country music. The percussive "drum" sound so prominent in these recordings is actually a "slapping bass," another rockabilly trademark. Paul Burlison, of the Johnny Burnette Trio, explains the technique: "You loosen that top string, the big E, about half way. You don't even tune it. It's got to be real loose to where you can pop it with the palm of your hand against the neck. You pop it first and hear that slapping sound, and then pull your fingers across your D and G strings. Slap, then pull."[ii]

In addition to "slapping," Bill Black alternated between a simple country-style bass and bluesy walking bass figures. Scotty Moore played a similar mix of country and blues, working gritty bent strings and blues licks into his Chet Atkins picking style, often mixing styles within the same lead break (as in "That's All Right," where the country figure that opens the solo dovetails into the "blue notes" and then out again, or in the bright country solo that jumps out of the middle of the bluesy "Milkcow Blues Boogie"). Moore's brilliant stylistic synthesis and lean, piercing sound added a crucial ingredient to Elvis' Sun style and, along with Carl Perkins' twangy picking, established the basic attack of all rockabilly guitarists.

The rhythmic foundation of the Sun recordings came from Elvis' acoustic guitar, which he—like Hank Williams—played hard and percussively, as much for the rhythm as for the notes or chords. Although he later used the guitar mainly as a prop, Elvis was a fine, energetic guitarist, and one of the many delights of the Sun Sessions is listening to Elvis pound away, skipping beats and surging ahead on his guitar with the same nervous energy and intensity that fueled his singing, which, of course, was the focus of it all. Against such a sparse backing, Elvis had plenty of room to develop the nuances and impressive range of his voice, which could shift from loud to soft, high to low, shouting to crooning at a moment's notice.

"**Baby Let's Play House**" is a textbook of Elvis' vocal styles: the low, sensual vibratos and inexplicable little hiccups ("Oh Baby, baby, bab-EE"), the chopped, breathless syllables, the sweep up to a high, pure tenor and the dramatic plummet back down to a sexy, quavering growl. His versatility and his willingness to let go and have fun with his voice gave his songs a wonderfully elastic and playful quality (note the self-mocking laugh in the final chorus of "Baby Let's Play House"). Elvis' voice was central to his appeal, though his looks—those eyes, that sneer—certainly contributed as well! Joined together in one astonishing package, and given the right music as a medium, his sensual voice and equally sensual image made for a viscerally powerful combination.

[i]It is also interesting to consider the "artificial" sound created by the slapback echo as the first of a long history of experiments and developments in recording technology that have enhanced rock & roll and, from the very beginning, made the Record more than merely a live performance captured on tape. (Elvis' live performances could not, of course, take advantage of the studio enhancements, though his formidable visual appeal more than made up for the thinner sound!)
[ii]Paul Burlison qoute from 1983 *Musician* magazine.

The Hillbilly Cat

Elvis, Scotty and Bill were as surprised as anyone by "That's All Right," and had no idea what kind of reaction to expect when people first heard this country boy singing the blues. The night the record was first aired on Memphis radio, Scotty confidently predicted they'd be "run out of town," while Elvis was so nervous he tuned in the station on his family radio, told his parents to listen and then took off to hide in a movie theater. He needn't have worried. The request lines lit up immediately, and WHBQ disc jockey Dewey Phillips (no relation to Sam) played the record over and over, all night long.

Dewey Phillips, who was white, was at first hesitant to spin the record since he only played black R&B on his show. His mixed audience included a lot of young whites, like Elvis, who tuned in to hear the latest R&B and Phillips' crazed, rapid-fire hepcat delivery. To ward off any confusion, Phillips had Elvis rounded up from the movie theater for an on-air interview, where the first order of business was to clarify his color (he simply got Elvis to say where he'd gone to high school—a clear sign in those segregated days). Still, no one knew quite what to make of the song or the singer. He was dubbed the "hillbilly cat" which, as Greil Marcus put it, meant the "white Negro." Or as Elvis later recalled, "...when the record came out a lot of people liked it, and you could hear folks around town saying, 'Is he, is he?' and I'm going, 'Am I, am I?'"[i]

Elvis quickly became a local star, then began working his way through the South in an endless string of one-nighters in high school gyms, National Guard armories and city parks. As the fan reaction got wilder and wilder, so did Elvis, who discovered that the more he shook his legs and moved his hips, the louder the girls screamed. Elvis recalled: "My very first appearance, I was on a show in Memphis [July 30, 1954]... I was scared stiff. I came out and I was doing a fast-type tune and everybody was hollering and I didn't know what they were hollering at... I came offstage and my manager told me they was hollering because I was wiggling. And so I went back out for an encore and I did a little more. And the more I did, the wilder they went."[ii] After a disastrous appearance on the *Grand Ole Opry*, where he was advised to go back to driving a truck (the good folks of Nashville told him they didn't want "any of that nigger music around here"), Elvis became a regular on the weekly *Louisiana Hayride* radio show in Shreveport, Louisiana, which beamed him into households throughout the South.

Elvis' popularity grew steadily during his year and a half at Sun, though it was still limited to the South and the country market (*Billboard* named him the nation's "most promising young country singer" in 1955). Meanwhile rock & roll was exploding around the country: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, the Platters and Bo Diddley all hit the pop charts in 1955, as did Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock," which proved that a white artist could capture that same beat and feel. The time was right for Elvis to make a move. **Col. Tom Parker**, his new manager, negotiated the sale of Elvis' contract to RCA for a whopping $40,000—a lot of money in 1955 for a relatively unknown and unproven talent.[iii]

For Elvis, the move to RCA meant a move to the Bigtime: the "struggle," such as it was, was over. In a few short months "Heartbreak Hotel" would hit the top of the national charts and Elvis would be the biggest thing to ever hit the entertainment scene. To mainstream America it seemed that Elvis became a star overnight, but some of his greatest music was already behind him by the time most of the nation first heard his name. At RCA, his massive fame and ambition, the demands of popular taste and the

weight of his all-consuming image would distance Elvis further and further from his own talent, and would add an element of self-consciousness and calculation to his songs and performances that was gloriously lacking in the free-for-all of his Sun days. The "Sun Sessions" provide a last glimpse of undiluted young Elvis at his breathtaking best.

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[i]Greil Marcus, "Mystery Train," rev. ed. (1976; New York: Dutton, 1982), p. 181.
[ii]Guralnick, *Sun Sessions* liner notes.
[iii]Though he never made his fortune off his "white man with the negro feel," Sam did quite well as one of the initial investors in the Memphis-based Holiday Inn chain.

The Glory Years: 1956-58

One night in 1957, Elvis took the stage at a large outdoor concert and asked the audience to rise with him and "sing our national anthem." As hats came off and hands went over hearts, he knelt solemnly, eyed the crowd, took a deep breath and tore into "Hound Dog!" Perfect! And he was right—as far as teenage America was concerned, it WAS our national anthem.

Elvis made his first television appearance on the Dorsey Brothers' *Stage Show* on January 28, 1956 His performance—his hips and "suggestive movements"—caused a storm of controversy and prompted a rash of angry calls from parents shocked at the display of unchecked emotion. If this sort of thing caught on, could rampant juvenile delinquency be far behind?

Elvis' appearance also sent shock waves through Young America. This wasn't some anonymous R&B vocal group or a middle-aged Bill Haley presenting rock & roll as "entertainment for the kids." This guy was one of *us*, young and bristling with energy, and he seemed to *live* rock & roll, not just perform it. To the horrified parents and delighted teenagers alike, Elvis seemed like James Dean incarnate—a rebel, though With a Cause this time: the raucous new rhythms of rock & roll.

50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong

Elvis took over where Frank Sinatra left off, then kept going up into uncharted realms of success. The Gold Record award for sales, for example, was essentially invented for Elvis (the mind-numbing hallway of gold records at Graceland, Elvis' Memphis home, is the high point of a tour there and a pertinent reminder of why Elvis continues to matter so much). The army of Elvis fans multiplied as rock & roll spread and grew to a point where RCA could release an album entitled *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong* without risking any accusations of exaggerated hype.

For the fans and for the flood of new singers who followed in his wake, Elvis completely defined what it meant to be a rocker, or at least a white rocker. When Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran and Ricky Nelson, for example, came out looking and sounding like Elvis clones, it was no more a matter of "ripping off" Elvis than to say the Rolling Stones or the Byrds were "copying the Beatles" by growing their hair. Elvis simply defined the fifties rock image. His southern brand of rock & roll became the dominant style and that impossible little curl in his lip, a harmless natural trait present even in his baby pictures, became the defiant sneer of an entire generation. His aura of bored but polite disdain for the adult world, and his ability to laugh at it and at himself with equal ease, gave rock & roll a model of both driving ambition and free-spirited fun. Most of all, his brooding sensuality defined the male ideal for both the swooning girls and their envious boyfriends, who tried their hardest to create that look of moody magnificence in themselves.

The visual image was a key ingredient in Elvis' popularity, and has been a central aspect of rock's appeal ever since. To feel Elvis' full impact you had to *see* him sway and shake and work himself into a seemingly uncontrollable frenzy. That image of wild, passionate abandon was then etched in the listener's mind, inseparable from the music itself. Elvis' explosion in the national consciousness was the first fully-televised ascent to stardom, and his arrival forever linked rock and television, the two beacons of popular

culture. The visual flash and excitement of rock & roll was perfectly suited for the camera, and no one was more perfectly suited than Elvis, who attracted cameras like a magnet and repaid the interest with an ever-fascinating and evolving image of perfection.

Elvis dominated the fifties as the Beatles would the sixties, giving rock & roll a broad appeal and opening up the turf for others to follow or create their own niche in. Elvis' success showed white singers that they, too, could rock out—that they didn't have to become Pat Boone to have a hit. And contradictory as it may seem, his success gave a big boost to the black artists as well. Elvis certainly covered black artists, but he sang the songs because he loved the music and never tried to steal a hit or compete with a song that was currently on the charts (a number of his covers were even big hits on the R&B charts). His covers naturally created interest in the original artists, giving them a wider audience as well: having Elvis wail "Tutti Frutti" on national TV was almost as much a victory for Little Richard as for Elvis. Soul singer and Sun veteran Rufus Thomas says that despite the resentment his success generated, "Elvis created an acceptance for black music that had never been there before—he opened a lot of doors."[i]

Still, the racism lurking beneath the surface of Elvis' coronation as the "King" of rock & roll remains a sad indictment of America's social attitudes. It should have been an easy matter for black artists to break through on their own, but it wasn't, and it is very obviously true that the black artists received less—and Elvis and his peers more—credit than they were due. Although black music was the main impetus for rock & roll, a white singer became the "King of Rock & Roll," just as Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman became the "Kings" of Jazz and Swing. In spite of this blatant injustice, rock & roll did bring black performers into the mainstream to a far greater extent than ever before, and its role in breaking down the racial barriers in our society is one of its happier legacies. At the very least it brought white and black kids together on the same dance floor, something years of court rulings and good intentions had failed to do.

Rebel in the Mainstream

1956 and 1957 were the glory years for Elvis Presley. After signing with RCA, his career spiraled upward with dizzying speed: by April of 1956, "Heartbreak Hotel" was at the top of all three charts (Pop, C&W and R&B), beginning a string of #1 hits that continued through Elvis' induction into the army in 1958. By then, though, things were already changing and the rough edges of his image and music—and of rock & roll in general—had begun to soften. In an effort to broaden his appeal and fulfill his most cherished dream, Elvis began work on his first movie, *Love Me Tender*, in August of 1956. The movie and its saccharine title song did broaden his appeal, but at the expense of his rebel image and commitment to rock & roll. Elvis made four movies in the fifties: *Love Me Tender*, *Loving You*, *King Creol*e and *Jailhouse Rock*. They weren't bad—the latter two were surprisingly good—but they distracted him from his recording and performing career and were, in retrospect, warning signs of the dismal decade to come.

There were other signs as well. Elvis made his last televised appearance of the fifties at the end of 1957 on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Disturbed by the complaints (those hips again) that followed his previous appearances, Sullivan decided to blunt the criticism by only filming Elvis from the waist up. (The last song Elvis sang that night was the Thomas Dorsey gospel classic "Peace in the Valley"—from the waist up!) To cap it off, Sullivan appeared at the end of the show to tell the country that Elvis was a "real decent, fine boy," giving him, in effect, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. A short time later he was in the army. The battle was lost.

Elvis' transformation from rebel hoodlum to decent all-American boy was remarkably swift. You can follow the changes in his TV clips, as his southern accent fades and the jeans and oversized hepcat suits give way to gold jackets and plugs for his latest movie. But along the way he made some great music and won a great victory for rock & roll. At least he was *on* national TV, shaking his hips (when they showed them), singing rock & roll and bringing an exuberant sexuality right into America's living rooms. And he was now on RCA, bringing huge profits to the label and sending the other majors scurrying to sign their own authentic rockers. After years of countering with covers and hoping that it would simply go away, Elvis' success at RCA forced the music industry to concede defeat and surrender to rock & roll.

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[i]In conversation with the author. The blues and R&B artists on the Sun roster had a particularly immediate reason for resenting Elvis, since his success led Sam Phillips into rockabilly and away from the black music that had started it all.

Elvis at RCA

Elvis racked up an impressive string of #1 hits in two short years: "Heartbreak Hotel," "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," "Don't Be Cruel," "Hound Dog," "Love Me Tender," "Too Much," "All Shook Up," "Teddy Bear," "Jailhouse Rock," "Don't," and "Hard Headed Woman." During that period Elvis held down the #1 position for a staggering 58 weeks. The statistics for his entire career are equally impressive: 41 gold albums, 18 #1 singles, 38 top ten and 107 top forty hits. Only the Beatles even came close to Elvis' domination of the charts.

Looking at the above list of songs, or any collection of Elvis songs, its hard not to be struck by the diversity and inconsistency of the material. "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock" are as tough and exciting as rock & roll gets, while "Love Me Tender" and "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" are mawkish ballads that would have made Johnny Ray or Pat Boone proud; "Too Much" and "Hard Headed Woman" have a bluesy sexuality while "Teddy Bear" seems barely out of puberty; and the eerie sound and adult sensibilities of "Heartbreak Hotel" are a sharp contrast to the sock-hop pop of "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up."

The true merits of Elvis Presley's music have always been the subject of some dispute. Elvis couldn't write songs or play the guitar like Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins and Buddy Holly, couldn't sustain the rock & roll fire of Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, lacked the consistency of Fats Domino... But no one else could have appealed to such varied tastes and united a nation fans the way Elvis did. If you hated "Love Me Tender," then you probably loved "Hound Dog"; if not, then you *had* to love "Don't Be Cruel." From schmaltzy ballads through mainstream pop to hard-edged rock & roll, Elvis covered all the bases—and when he was at his best, he was indeed the King of rock & roll. At his worst, he was nearly unlistenable, and he was always capable of turning out mediocre, half-hearted material at RCA, where the pressures of sustaining his success and image inevitably had an effect on his music, especially with the added demands of the movies and the requisite soundtrack songs. Eventually he covered too many bases, and diluted his talent in his attempt to appeal to everyone, though it is also that grand, sweeping attempt to be all things to all people that makes Elvis Presley such a spectacular and uniquely American success story. In any case, that the same man could record "Hound Dog" and "Old Shep," with equal conviction, is just one of the many apparent contradictions that make Elvis so fascinating and so exasperating.

"Heartbreak Hotel"

Elvis got off to a great start at RCA with "**Heartbreak Hotel**," which started its steady climb up the charts in January 1956. The Elvis of "Heartbreak Hotel" sounds as if he's suffocating in some twisted after-hours club in the Twilight Zone, backed by a half-demented jazz bass and piano and a distorted guitar that rails against the desolation of the song's lyrics and mood. "Heartbreak Hotel" is unlike anything he recorded at Sun: big, spacious and massively reverberated where the Sun sound was lean and focused, set with an instrumental arrangement punctuated by stops, starts and dynamic subtleties that seem a world away from the full-speed-ahead feel of rockabilly, and sung with a brash, worldwise voice that already seems far removed from the innocence of his wide-eyed Memphis celebrations.

Scotty Moore and Bill Black made the dramatic change with Elvis and remained the core of his band at RCA, along with drummer **D. J. Fontana**, who had toured with Elvis since they met at the *Louisiana Hayride*. At RCA, the band was usually augmented to include a piano, an extra guitar and a gospel-style backing vocal group, the **Jordanaires**, who had a knack for adding ludicrously polite harmonies to even the hardest rock songs.[i] Still uncertain about Elvis' style and appeal, RCA first chose their Nashville studios as the logical place to tap his Memphis rockabilly. (Elvis continued to record in Nashville throughout his career, alternating with sessions in New York and Hollywood.) Nashville wasn't Memphis, however, and Elvis was no longer a "rockabilly," and the results were markedly different.

The Rockers

The songs Elvis chose to record ranged from hard-edged *rock* to catchy *pop* and sentimental *ballads*, and his overall output can be loosely divided into those three styles. He cut through the dense guitar and drums clatter of his hardest rockers with a raucous voice that he, and everyone else, borrowed from Little Richard. This hard rocking side of Elvis included most of his cover songs, such as "Hound Dog," "Blue Suede Shoes," "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," "Shake, Rattle and Roll" and his many Little Richard covers, and some of his most riveting original performances, including "Jailhouse Rock" and "A Big Hunk O' Love."

Elvis' version of "**Hound Dog**" serves as a good illustration of the difference between "rockabilly" and "rock & roll." Rockabilly was, of course, inseparable from—was a version of—rock & roll, and its influence is clearly felt in the instrumentation and the sheer energy and tough sound of "Hound Dog." On the other hand, the rough, aggressive vocals, the huge drum sound, added hand claps, distorted guitar, pop-styled vocal backing and big, slick production make the record very different from the lean minimalism of his Sun style, while the blues and country mixture that fueled rockabilly is only faintly audible, if at all. Rock & roll was developing a tradition of its own and, like Elvis, was already a giant step removed from its roots.

"Hound Dog" was originally recorded by Big Mama Thornton in 1952, though Elvis' version was actually based on a comic rendition by a Las Vegas lounge band—much of the humor derived from the male rendition of the song's female point of view, though this element of humor was vaporized in the ferocity of Elvis' attack. The song was written by the team of **Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller** (with uncredited help from Johnny Otis), who then began supplying Elvis with hits written specifically for him, including "Jailhouse Rock," "Loving You," "Love Me," "Don't," "Treat Me Nice" and "(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care." Elvis left the ancient blues and country behind at RCA, first turning to covers of more recent R&B and rock & roll songs, then to new material written for him as his popularity and appeal to songwriters grew.[ii]

Leiber and Stoller wrote "**Jailhouse Rock**" for the 1957 movie of the same name. Like the rest of his movie songs, it was written to order—the script called for a production number in a jail—in the manner that was largely responsible for the decline of Elvis' material in later years. In the hands of Leiber and Stoller, however, the song became an aural jail break that transcended the plot and inspired a full-throttle performance from Elvis, backed by a syncopated drum beat meant to sound like convicts busting rocks on a chain gang. Elvis also choreographed the song's production number

for the movie, and danced one of his best routines to its beat, happily mocking the outlaw role that much of America had hoisted upon him.

"**A Big Hunk O' Love**" was recorded in June 1956 during a leave of absence from the army shortly after Elvis' induction. (RCA was anxious, to say the least, about their star's departure, and wanted to make sure they had a supply of Elvis to release during his absence. "A Big Hunk O' Love" wasn't released until 1959.) The session featured new backing musicians, including guitarist Hank Garland, bassist Bob Moore, pianist Floyd Cramer and drummer Buddy Harman, who would continue with him upon his return from the service. (Scotty and Bill felt increasingly ignored and superfluous at RCA, and broke with Elvis shortly before his induction. Scotty returned to front his sixties bands, but Bill left for good and started his own Bill Black Combo. He died of a brain tumor in 1965.) Highlighted by stop-start guitar riffs and high, rapidfire piano runs, the full sound and streamlined energy of the arrangement prompted a great performance from Elvis, who made the most of the song's sexual undercurrent and bluesy feel. "A Big Hunk O' Love" is ample proof that Elvis had lost none of his taste and talent for pure rock & roll, and ample reason to lament the arrival of his draft notice.

The Pop Songs

"Hound Dog" was just one half of an amazing 1956 single: the flipside was "**Don't Be Cruel**," a pairing that resulted in the highest selling single record of the 1950's. The double-sided hit also offers a good comparison of Elvis' uptempo styles. While the straight rock of "Hound Dog" emphasizes a big beat and raucous sound over a 12-bar blues, the pop-oriented "Don't Be Cruel" has a lighter beat and gentler accompaniment that focuses attention on the clever melody and lyrics. Memorable melodies, catchy "hooks" and romantic lyrics have always been the hallmarks of pop, and the difference between the sexually aggressive "Hound Dog" and the playfully innocent "Don't Be Cruel" is roughly the difference between rock and pop, though not in any sense that Mom and Dad might have recognized. "Don't Be Cruel" is clearly more different from Perry Como or any other earlier pop style than it is from "Hound Dog." The immediacy of the Elvis' performance and the song's eminently danceable beat, teen-oriented lyrics and unadorned sound—no strings, horn section or heavenly choir—placed it squarely in the world of "Hound Dog" and Little Richard. "Don't Be Cruel" represented a new conception of "pop," redefined within the context of the rock audience and rock & roll aesthetics.

The pop-rock feel of "Don't Be Cruel" was echoed happily a year later in "All Shook Up." Both songs are propelled by a gently rolling boogie-bass line and an airy sound and infectious beat (which was actually created by Elvis tapping the back of his guitar while D. J. Fontana "played" a guitar case with his hands). The screaming guitars and drums of "Hound Dog" are nowhere to be found, and their absence left plenty of room for Elvis to glide, swoop, quaver, hiccup, stretch and clip his syllables and use all the signature effects from his Sun days to full advantage. The relatively sparse accompaniment also leaves more room for the ever-present Jordanaires, who actually make sense on a record like "Don't Be Cruel."

"Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up" were both written by **Otis Blackwell**, who also supplied Elvis with "Paralyzed" and "Return to Sender." Other standouts in Elvis' pop vein included "Treat Me Nice," "Teddy Bear," "I Got Stung" and "(You're So

Square) Baby I Don't Care." For many fans, and most Elvis imitators, this is the most distinctive Elvis style.

The Ballads

Elvis' ballads fit more easily within the "old" definition of "pop," though Elvis' vocal style and the sparse backing arrangements of the "rock-a-ballads" were still far removed from the syrupy strings-and-harp settings and vibrato-laden singing of earlier popular ballads. The songs range from the very touching and beautifully sung, such as "Love Me Tender," "I Was the One" and "Loving You," to schmaltzy melodramas like "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," "Love Me," "That's When Your Heartaches Begin."

"**Love Me Tender**," the title song from Elvis' first movie, is backed by a gently strummed acoustic guitar and sentimental, humming-by-the-campfire background voices that fit the Western setting of the movie. Elvis sings the song in a sincere and fairly unadorned style, close-miked for an extra feeling of intimacy. Sung to the tune of "Aura Lee," an old folk ballad of the 1860's, "Love Me Tender" did much to broaden Elvis' appeal to both younger pre-teen fans and older listeners (much as the Beatles' "Yesterday" expanded their audience).

Elvis had always loved sentimental ballads and he sang them with the same conviction he brought to rock & roll. Still, it is in the ballads and some of the more lightweight up-tempo material that Elvis began to display questionable judgment, to put it kindly, and a loss of musical focus. Given good material, like "A Big Hunk O' Love," Elvis could always rise to the occasion and make a great record. But as the good material began to dry up, or be buried under the flood of demotapes from every hack writer around, so did Elvis' interest, and his recording sessions began to take on the feeling of perfunctory routine—a far cry from the thoroughly absorbed conviction of the Sun and early RCA days. The problem was certainly compounded by his manager, Col. Parker, who heard only the sound of cash registers in Elvis' music. He knew that the mainstream was where the money was, and he firmly pushed his impressionable and success-hungry young client in that direction.

But rock & roll defined itself *against* the mainstream, even while it was succeeding within it. That tension between acceptance and defiance gave (and continues to give) rock & roll much of its power to challenge and threaten, as well as its tendency, too often, to descend to mere product. That tension was always present at the heart of Elvis' image and music. His desire to appeal to everyone (he even released an album called *Something for Everybody*) was always at odds with his urge to throw off all constraints and get "real, real gone." Elvis had the mind of a polite entertainer and the soul of a true rocker, and these "two Elvises"—the polite southern boy who desperately craved respectability and the rebel who sneered at it—battled each other throughout his career.

In the end it was a draw: the distinctions were simply smoothed over and rendered meaningless in the last years of his life. In a sense, Elvis' career encapsulated the course of rock music itself through the decades. Rock has now been so absorbed into the mainstream that it has simply *become* the mainstream. If it can rebel at all, it can only rebel against itself, which is all Elvis could do in his last decades.

[i] The extra guitar at some of the first sessions was played by Scotty's hero, Chet Atkins; Nashville veteran Floyd Cramer played piano on "Heartbreak Hotel," and regularly recorded with Elvis through the sixties.

[ii] Although Elvis never actually wrote a song himself, his name mysteriously appeared as co-author on a number of songs. This partly reflected the fact that Elvis would often re-work the songs to fit his style and feel. Mainly, though, it reflects a type of "payola" that was rampant in the fifties; quite simply, co-authorship credit would bring more royalties to Elvis. The writers rarely complained, since half of the songwriting royalties from an Elvis hit was a *lot* better than full royalties from anyone else.

The Army: 1958-60

"Elvis the Pelvis" became Private Presley, U.S. Army, in March of 1958. For the following two years he was out of circulation, serving first at Ft. Hood, Texas, and then in Friedberg, West Germany. From today's perspective, it seems almost unbelievable that Elvis would go into the army at the peak of his powers and popularity. He *was* drafted, of course, but it was a peacetime draft and it would have been fairly easy for Elvis to either avoid it altogether or to arrange to serve in the Special Services, singing for the troops, promoting the army and otherwise going on as if nothing had happened. Instead, Elvis chose to serve his time like any other inductee, cutting his salary from over $100,000 to $78 a month and completely abandoning his recording and performing career.

Or perhaps more to the point, Col. Parker recognized the public relations value of G.I. Elvis. There would certainly have been howls of indignant outrage from rock-hating parents if it seemed that Elvis had received any sort of "preferential treatment." In addition, the army provided an escape from the intense pressures of superstardom. By exiting at the peak of his popularity, Elvis could sidestep the possible embarrassment of watching that popularity decline. Since no one had ever been in his position before, it was impossible to know how long his luck could last or what kind of future an "aging" rock star could expect. In any case, and contrary to the glowing press releases, Elvis was fairly miserable during his army stay. He worried about his career and missed home terribly; most of all, he missed his beloved mother, who died shortly after Elvis was inducted, casting a gloom over his stay in Germany and the rest of his life.

For better or worse, serving in the army had a sanitizing effect on Elvis' image that all the money and publicity in the world couldn't have bought. Photographs of Elvis getting his hair shorn, riding tanks and peeling potatoes were flashed across the country, and suddenly this once threatening symbol of juvenile delinquency became a shining example of patriotism and decency, willing to give up his riches and fame for the honor of serving his country. Even the kids who were mourning the loss of their idol watched it all with admiration (the army was still a popular destination in 1958) and listened in astonishment as their parents began chiding them with "Why can't you be more like Elvis?!"

Hollywood: 1960-68

By the time Elvis emerged from the army, and at least partly because of his absence, rock & roll had gone into a tailspin. The rough edges and raw nerve that had made it so exciting were being smoothed over and softened in an attempt by the music industry to make rock & roll safe and controllable. Rock had dissolved back into harmless pop and the airwaves were dominated by cleancut, watered-down, sexless Elvises who seemed to have forgotten—if they ever knew—that rock & roll came from the blues.

Unfortunately, Elvis seemed to have forgotten as well, though he once knew it better than anyone. More to the point, he no longer saw himself as a "rock & roll star" and was now intent on pursuing a career as a movie star and "all-around entertainer." A strong desire for mainstream acceptance and respectability had always been the flipside of his rebelliousness—that tension is part of what made him so exciting—and in moving away from rock & roll he was simply adapting to the changes that had happened in his absence and to his own view of himself as a "maturing" artist. In any case, it's too bad. Elvis still had the talent, power and popularity to rally the rock troops for a second time, and he could have single-handedly kicked rock & roll back into gear by exchanging his army uniform for a leather jacket and rocking back onto the charts.

Instead he opted out and became, irony of ironies, essentially a watered-down Elvis imitator himself, turning out harmless ballads and an unending stream of forgettable movies. His looks and his voice were still beautiful, but the sex, threat and energy were nearly gone. Jerry Lee Lewis, himself a casualty of the teen idol trend, held Elvis largely responsible for leaving rock's direction in the hands of Dick Clark and the teen idol machines: "We kept cutting rock & roll records, though nobody would play them. Elvis started singing like Bing Crosby. Don't get me wrong, I love Elvis and he's a great talent, but I think he let us down."[i] After his release from the army, Elvis performed at a couple of charity benefits and made a TV appearance on a Frank Sinatra special, eyes firmly fixed on the middle of the road. He then abandoned live appearances altogether and spent the next eight years buried in Hollywood while the music world changed dramatically.

Even the movie years need not have been so dismal. Elvis could actually act quite well, given a good director and a believable script (as *Flaming Star* and handful—a small handful—of other movies proved). Similarly, he could still, given good material, make a great record. Unfortunately he rarely had the chance to live up to his talents in either endeavor. Songwriters Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman provided "Little Sister," "(Marie's the Name) His Latest Flame," "Surrender," "Mess of the Blues," "She's Not You" and other sixties standouts, but most of his post-army hits were ballads like "Are You Lonesome Tonight," "Can't Help Falling in Love" and the operatic "It's Now or Never": huge hits, beautifully sung, but a long way from rock & roll. Things got progressively worse as he descended further into Hollywood and soundtrack albums filled with trivial songs that were embarrassing enough in the movie. Only the gospel songs from this period were of consistent quality and sung with real conviction. In any case, it's more than a little painful to hear the King of Rock & Roll reduced to singing "Do the Clam" or "Old MacDonald," and one can only wonder at the monumental lapse of pride that could lead Elvis to record a piece of drivel like "Rock-a-hula Baby" at the same session that produced a classic like "Little Sister." Col. Parker and the movie studios aside, Elvis

could still have taken control of his musical direction, but he simply didn't seem to have one, and worse, he didn't really seem to care.

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[i]Tony Palmer, "All You Need Is Love," (1976; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 229.

The 1968 Comeback

After sleepwalking through Hollywood for eight years, Elvis' following had dwindled to a still large but rapidly shrinking and aging group of die-hard fans. Meanwhile, Elvis Presley was little more than a joke, and a bad one at that, to the new generation of rock fans. In the era of the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, his movies and music seemed to epitomize exactly the type of showbiz sellout that the sixties rockers scorned. With the exception of 1965's "Crying in the Chapel," Elvis hadn't scored a Top Ten hit since 1963—since the arrival of the Beatles and a new rock era.

Painfully aware of his diminishing stature, Elvis decided it was time to get in front of an audience again and prove, to himself as much as anyone else, that he was still the King. An hour of prime time was booked on NBC for a Christmas special to be aired on December 3, 1968. Col. Parker envisioned a wholesome hour of Christmas songs and family entertainment, which would have been perfectly in keeping with Elvis' image at that point. For once in his life Elvis put his foot down, overruled the Colonel and came out rocking, determined not to go down without a fight.

He fought hard—and he won, maybe because for the first time in over a decade he *had* to fight. Elvis was, by his own admission, terrified of facing a live crowd after such a long absence from the stage. For the first time since he walked into Sun Studios or onto *Stage Show*, he was an Outsider again, with a lot to lose and a victory he would have to *win*, not merely act out. To the delight of his old fans and the astonishment of all those who had given up on him, he did it: for one last time, Elvis was really ELVIS again.

The Christmas special had its share of corny production numbers, but the centerpiece of the show featured a leather-clad Elvis, slimmed to perfection, singing his heart out in an informal jam session with a small circle of old friends, including Scotty Moore and D. J. Fontana. It was the very essence of rockabilly again: everything on the line, with no big bands or background singers, no theatrics and no movie script or anything else to hide behind. Elvis reached into himself in a way he hadn't since those distant Sun days, and blasted through his old hits with exactly the passion and urgency that had been missing in all the years that had come in-between. In his excellent book, "Mystery Train," Greil Marcus summed up the unexpected power of Elvis' performance this way: "It was the finest music of his life. If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it. Nothing came easy that night, and he gave everything he had—more than anyone knew was there."[i] Including, no doubt, Elvis.

The *Memphis Record*

Fueled by the success of the show and his own renewed confidence, Elvis decided to ease out of the movies and concentrate again on live performances. He also went through a long overdue recording renaissance. In January and February, 1969, Elvis recorded two albums worth of material, now known as *The Memphis Record*, at Chips Moman's American Studios in Memphis—his first recordings in Memphis since leaving Sun. (Though he recorded and made movies elsewhere, his Graceland mansion in Memphis remained his home until his death, and is now his burial site.)

Recording on home turf once again, Elvis seemed to rediscover his musical heritage. Backed by veteran Memphis session players with roots similar to his own, Elvis again infused his pop style with the expressive immediacy of the blues, country and

gospel music. It was not really a "return" to his old style but an updating of it, from a new, mature vantage point. The blues and country songs were now full and modern sounding with big, contemporary arrangements, while the gospel elements—now called "soul"— were more prominent than ever. Above all, the songs reflected adult sensibilities and adult realities; Elvis was finally taking care to choose songs that struck a personal chord with him—songs that inspired and deserved the passion of his voice. Having reclaimed and redeemed his past with the TV special, it seemed that Elvis was finally free to grow up and move on to the next stage of his career and life.

The *Memphis Record* material sealed Elvis' comeback and his claim to artistic vitality, and yielded a number of hits, including the socially-conscious "In the Ghetto" and "**Suspicious Minds**," his first #1 hit since 1962's "Good Luck Charm." "Suspicious Minds" serves as a good example of Elvis' mature style: the emotionally direct lyrics are supported by a country-rock guitar and rhythm section, gospel-styled backup singers, and a big pop string and brass arrangement, and are sung with grand drama and utter conviction. Elvis' changing personal life surely contributed to the soulful depth of his new music. He married Priscilla Ann Beaulieu in 1967, longing for the security and sense of family he had missed since his mother's death. Instead, the troubled marriage ended in divorce in 1973 (a daughter, Lisa Marie, was born in 1968), and the emotional turmoil is felt in the emotion of his best recordings from that era. "Suspicious Minds," "Any Day Now," "Kentucky Rain," "Only the Strong Survive," "Long Black Limousine" and other standouts from the 1969 sessions are sung with a deeply resonant adult voice that would have been far beyond the emotional and physical grasp of the 19-year-old at Sun.

The triumphant return to form revealed in the Memphis recordings became the basis for Elvis' return to the stage. Unfortunately, they didn't always translate well to his elaborate live shows, where the size and spectacle of the show often overshadowed the music. The emotional power of the new material was quickly lost in the giant halls while his old rock & roll hits suffocated under the glossy new big band arrangements. Elvis had won another great victory at the end of the sixties. In depressingly familiar fashion, he then began throwing it away. Instead of the army, this time he went to Las Vegas.

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[i] Marcus, "Mystery Train," p. 149.

The Final, Sad Decline

The grand ballrooms of Las Vegas were the setting for Elvis' return to full-time performing. Elvis played 57 shows at the Las Vegas International Hotel in July and August of 1969, and made Las Vegas his performing home base through the early seventies. The decision says much about what had become of Elvis' image and audience. He was at the height of his rock & roll powers when he made his first appearance in Las Vegas in 1956, and he flopped. It was a disastrous case of bad booking: rock & roll flew in the face of the glitter and schlock that Las Vegas exemplified, and the high-rolling crowds were as foreign and threatening to Elvis as he was to them. Now, in 1969, he was perfectly at home with the glitzy neon settings, jeweled Liberace jumpsuits and all the other gaudy trappings of American success that so quickly replaced the leather jacket and raw intensity of the '68 special. The two sides of Elvis—the artist and the entertainer—were still battling, and the wrong one was winning again.

Elvis' return to the stage was initially a great triumph, supported by good new material, a good backup band (led by guitarist James Burton) and a renewed sense of musical direction. To his credit, Elvis re-established himself as a contemporary star, not a nostalgia act, singing new material alongside his old hits and performing concerts, not revival shows. Of all the surviving fifties giants, only Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis retained any real semblance of artistic vitality and growth, sporadic as it may have been.

It was certainly sporadic in Elvis' case, and depressingly short-lived. Soon enough it all became too easy and boring again. He toured constantly through the seventies, branching out from Las Vegas to giant arenas around the country, but the tours became yet another movie set and Elvis the man and artist became almost a bit player in the ongoing drama of his larger-than-life myth. He was eventually trapped by his consuming fame and by a mindlessly adoring public that was thrilled by a big belt buckle and a few half-hearted karate kicks, and would probably have cheered if he'd simply gotten onstage and gargled. As the atmosphere at his concerts, and in his personal life, became more surreal and circus-like, his commitment to his music faded into the background again. The great country-rocker "**Burning Love**," which hit #2 in 1972, was the last major hit of his life.

Elvis' last days were the sad final chapter of the most wildly successful—and the most tragic and lonely—American success story of them all. It is easy to judge the final period of Elvis' life too quickly and harshly. Watching video clips of a grotesquely obese and lethargic Elvis slurring his way through his last performances, it's hard to imagine how anyone, let alone anyone with his talent, could let himself slip so far. But it's even harder for anyone else to imagine the kind of claustrophobic life he lived and the pressure he felt in trying to live up to the idealized image of "Elvis" while the real-life man aged and crumbled. The abuse of prescription drugs that hastened his death began as a desperate attempt to lose weight and keep the image alive, and ended as an even more desperate attempt to block out the pain of having failed. Only the Beatles could possibly understand the type of maddening pressure Elvis lived with, and they, at least, had each other. Elvis didn't have a John or Paul to challenge his creativity or preserve his sanity. Apparently he didn't even have a friend compassionate or courageous enough to tell him he was killing himself or keep him from doing it. Elvis Presley died in Memphis on August 16, 1977.

Elvis Is Everywhere

The reaction worldwide was one of stunned disbelief: a mixture of empty numbness for all the years it had been since he'd really seemed to matter, and genuine shock and sorrow for the suddenly distant times when he had mattered most of all. The King of Rock & Roll—dead?! As several generations aged overnight, the King's passing became a metaphor for rock's lost innocence and Elvis became, once again, forever young. Bob Dylan: "I broke down... One of the few times. I went over my whole life. I went over my whole childhood. I didn't talk to anyone for a week after Elvis died. If it wasn't for Elvis and Hank Williams, I couldn't be doing what I do today."[i] That feeling of personal loss was shared by millions of fans and by millions of others who hadn't thought of Elvis for years but now felt as if they'd lost a part of themselves. The loss was echoed on a communal level as well, as the rock world said good-bye to one of the few forces that really had united it (as it would say a collective good-bye just three years later after the murder of John Lennon). As Lester Bangs so memorably put it, "I can guarantee you one thing: we will never again agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis. So I won't bother saying good-bye to his corpse. I will say good-bye to you."[ii]

Even in death, the two Elvises—the artist and the icon—battle it out, as reissuings of his great music alternate with "Elvis sightings" and endless tabloid articles. (When his image finally graced a United States postal stamp, even the government felt compelled to address the issue and ask the public to vote for *which Elvis*—young rocker or adult entertainer—would be depicted. In a rare display of good judgment, the young Elvis won out.) He finally did succeed in becoming all things to all people: everyone has their own unique image of Elvis, it seems, and the endless fascination with both the man and his myth shows no sign of abating. Ultimately, though, it is all a footnote to what really matters: that perfect image of young Elvis in the 1950's—the timeless music he made and the revolution he helped create. It is *that* Elvis who will matter as long as rock & roll matters, and it is that Elvis who will forever be the King.

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[i]Robert Sheldon, "No Direction Home," (New York: William Morrow, 1986), p. 480.
[ii]Lester Bangs, "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung," (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 216.

ROCKABILLY

Elvis Presley's 1954-55 Sun recordings, though largely unknown in the North, were a revelation to the young southerners who shared his social and musical roots and his impatience with the rigid conventions of country music. Having heard the startling news that a white boy could sing the blues, keep its energy and add his own, aspiring Elvises began springing up throughout the South, setting their sights and dreams on Sam Phillips' tiny Memphis studio.

Rockabilly and the South

"Rockabilly" was invented the night Elvis, Scotty and Bill launched into "That's All Right," and the frenzied mix of country, blues, gospel and pop that the trio perfected at Sun became, and remains, the blueprint for the style. The stripped-down production, emotional immediacy and sheer energy of Elvis' Sun recordings are rockabilly's common denominator, and the slapback echo, slapping bass, piercing twangy guitar, vocal "Elvis-isms" and other musical traits are its raw materials. It's impossible to play rockabilly and not sound a little like Elvis—most sounded a *lot* like him, and proudly so. (When Elvis' mother first heard Gene Vincent's "Be-Bop-A-Lula" on the radio, she called her son to congratulate him on his new release, or so the story goes.)

For the poor whites on the stage or on the dance floor, the unbridled energy of rockabilly offered at least a momentary escape from life's everyday drudgeries. As Carl Perkins put it, "We shook the devil loose! We bopped those blues! It's up-tempo, it's rhythm. You ain't sittin' there worrying about car payments or house notes. You're out there shakin' dust loose on those honky-tonk floors."[i] The pervasive spirit was one of youth and *fun*—of cutting loose and living for Right Now, with a hint of violence underlying it all, born of bottle-dodging nights playing roadhouses where the bands and drunken, brawling audiences had to be separated with chicken wire...

A sense of regional identity and pride also fueled the music. Rockabilly was distinctly and proudly *southern*, and its success on the national pop charts was something of a victory for all the southerners who felt shut out of the mainstream. Blues harpist Charlie Musselwhite recalls Elvis' triumphant appearance: "The Yankees had put us down for so long, I just can't express how important it was when Elvis made it. He was immediately recognizable as being southern—the minute he opened his mouth, we knew he was just like us."[ii]

No longer confined to the world of country music (which watched with alarm as its young artists and audience defected to rock & roll), a new generation of Confederate rebels could now take aim at the pop world without hiding their accents or polishing their sound. Rockabilly's rough, southern edges were an exciting contrast to the group-oriented rhythm & blues produced in the North's urban centers. Unfortunately, it was also the rough and untamed quality of rockabilly that fell out of favor in the later 1950's when the major record labels tightened their grip on rock & roll and began the process of taming and sweetening it (helped along by Elvis himself). By the end of the decade rockabilly seemed primitive and archaic to the fans of the teen idols and "American Bandstand," and its greatest practitioners were again banished to the backwoods and

county fair circuit (or to Europe, where a hunger for all things American kept the rock & roll flame alive).

Rockabilly's heyday may have been relatively brief, but it provided a crucial sound, image and rebellious spirit for rock's initial wave. For many it remains the "purest" form of rock & roll. The rockabilly revival in the early 1980's, led by the Stray Cats, and all the mini-revivals before and since are happy reminders of the music's timeless spirit and vitality. That spirit lives on every night in clubs where rockabilly and "roots rock" bands continue to reach back to rock's earliest years for inspiration. And it certainly lives on in the now ancient records by the original masters. In the words of rockabilly veteran Charlie Feathers, "We were young, you know, we didn't really know what we was doing. But I'll tell you, buddy, we really did do *something*!"[iii]

Sun Records After Elvis

Classic rockabilly was almost entirely the product of one small record label: Sam Phillips' Sun Records. The regional success of Elvis' first recordings made Memphis the Mecca for aspiring rockabillies. Young hopefuls from across the South came to audition for Sam Phillips and his partners, Judd Phillips (Sam's brother) and Jack Clement. Most were turned away; others made records of little interest and quickly returned to their regular jobs or family farms, but many proved to have considerable talent. After all, Memphis sat at the heart of the most musical region of the country, and when Sam Phillips sold Elvis to RCA, he did so largely to finance the recording and promotion of other promising artists he had signed to Sun. First among them was Carl Perkins.

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[i]Bill Flanagan, "Written in My Soul," (Chicago: Contemporary, 1986), p. 16.
[ii]Musselwhite quote from December, 1983 "Guitar Player" magazine.
[iii]Peter Guralnick, "Lost Highway," (1979; rpt. New York: Random House, 1982), p. 109.

"**Honey Don't**," released on the flipside of "Blue Suede Shoes," is a self-mocking plea to a straying woman ("You've been out a-paintin' the town, uh-huh baby been slippin' around...") goaded along by a loping boogie riff and a strong accent on the offbeat. Like "Blue Suede Shoes," "Honey Don't" is full of the clever rhymes and wordplays, down-home humor, hillbilly imagery, hepcat slang and excited interjections ("bop bop!," "rock!," "go cat!") that characterize most of Perkin's songs, along with Sun Records' musical trademarks: slapping bass, slapback echo, the percussive acoustic guitar, lean production, etc. Both songs are based on a 12-bar blues and feature a halting stop-start verse rhythm balanced by a more propulsive feeling in the choruses and lead breaks. The whole is shaped by Perkins' distinctive guitar playing—a blend of blues and boogie runs and jangling country licks, delivered with a mix of flat picking (using a guitar pick on the chords and on the low-string boogie riffs, such as those accompanying the "Honey Don't" refrain) and finger-picking (on the high-string leads and on the "fills" between sung lines, as in the "Blue Suede Shoes" chorus). "My guitar style is nothin' in the world but black blues speeded up. If you slowed down the guitar break on "Blue Suede Shoes" or any of my Sun records, it wouldn't be a thing but black blues."[i] Perkins' guitar playing was supremely tasteful and musical, the purest definition of rockabilly guitar playing for those who followed. (George Harrison, for one, idolized Perkins and nailed his style perfectly on "Honey Don't," "Matchbox" and "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby," the three Perkins songs covered by the Beatles .)

For all the similarities and style traits shared by Perkins and Elvis, their music and personalities were very different. Shy, retiring Perkins, with a wife and kids at home, had little of Elvis' charismatic sensuality and burning ambition, and always seemed more comfortable with a country lifestyle than with the trappings of stardom. (It's hard to imagine Carl Perkins in Hollywood!) Similarly, his recordings lack the unrestrained abandon and overt passion of Presley's and seem, instead, more like a natural extension of his hillbilly roots than a rebellious break with tradition. Elvis' move to RCA clarified the distinction between rockabilly and rock & roll: his rendition of "Blue Suede Shoes" is propelled by a huge drum beat, full band sound, streamlined dance rhythm and polished production that makes it very different from Perkins' countrified original. With its barndance beats and twangy vocals and guitar, Perkins' music could never leave its southern accents far enough behind to pass for mainstream rock & roll.

Dixie Fried

Carl Perkins wrote his own songs, unlike Elvis and most of the other white rockers of the fifties (only Buddy Holly showed the same talent for writing), and he always stayed true to his pristine rockabilly style, unwilling or unable to bend and adapt to changing trends and styles. His music seemed to spring directly from his life and the honky-tonk world he knew best, and it always served as a reminder of the "hillbilly" roots of "rockabilly." Indeed, many of Perkins' greatest songs are anthems to the South and the freewheeling side of its culture. In "Boppin' the Blues," Perkins sings of the joys of country folk discovering the purifying powers of a big blues beat, while "**Dixie Fried**" spins a tale of a wild, brawling southern night, complete with flashing razors ("he jerked out a razor but he wasn't shavin!"), a police raid and a drunken hero behind bars still exhorting his pals to "rave on" and get "Dixie Fried." Perkin's dedication to his heritage

gave his music much of its charm and "authenticity," but it also limited its commercial appeal in a market that was being increasingly geared toward a younger teen and pre-teen national audience. Nonetheless, with the huge success of "Blue Suede Shoes," it seemed at first that Carl Perkins was destined to be a big star.

That dream ended abruptly in March 1956 when the band was traveling to New York for a string of major television appearances. A terrible car wreck badly injured Carl and his brother Jay (who died in 1958 from complications resulting from the crash). Instead of gaining invaluable media exposure for himself and his hit record, Carl was out of commission for nine months, watching from the sidelines as Elvis released his own version of "Blue Suede Shoes" and became more associated with the song than Perkins himself.[ii] Perkins was back in form and in the studio by the end of the year, but it was too late. He kept making great records, including "**Matchbox**" (a rockabilly reworking of an old Blind Lemon Jefferson blues, featuring Jerry Lee Lewis on piano), "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby," "Put Your Cat Clothes On" and "Glad All Over," but his moment had come and gone and the records were only regional hits.

The King of Rockabilly

Carl Perkins left Sun Records for Columbia in 1958, but the move to a major label failed to work the same type of magic that it had for Elvis. The late 1950's and the early 1960's "teen idol" era was a wasteland for Carl, who had to follow other "old-timers" to England and Europe to find the respect he deserved. Depressed by his dormant career, the death of his brother and other personal problems, Perkins drank heavily and self-destructed for many years.

Perkins joined old friend Johnny Cash's band in 1968 after the death Cash's guitarist, Luther Perkins (no relation), and spent several happy years with the Cash entourage. Perkins played on the famous prison shows that solidified Cash's "man in black" image and fame, and wrote a few hits for Cash, including "Daddy Sang Bass." He also quit drinking, got religion and straightened out his life, and completed his circle in the late seventies when he began touring on his own again with his sons, instead of his brothers, as his backup band.

The 1980's rockabilly revival brought a renewed appreciation of the King of Rockabilly. Ever humble and always grateful for his good fortune, Perkins seems genuinely touched by the admiration of his descendants and feels a bond with them that bridges the years. One crucial point separates them, however, as it separates all the "original masters" from their disciples—Perkins can remember a time *before* rock & roll: "[Rock & roll] came out of black spiritual music... We mixed that up with country music. But the new guys don't go that far back with the *music*. They go back with the *records*. We go from the record on down to the cotton patch where it came from. That's the difference."[iii]

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[i]Flanagan, "Written in My Soul," p. 15.

[ii] There were no hard feelings: Perkins liked his friend's version and was grateful that Elvis had held back its release until Perkin's original had run its chart course.

[iii]Flanagan, p. 22.

JERRY LEE LEWIS

At the outskirts of Ferriday, Louisiana, there is a sign proudly proclaiming it the home of Jimmy Swaggart, Mickey Gilley and Jerry Lee Lewis. The three are first cousins, and between them they pretty well sum up the extremes of the white South, from fire 'n' brimstone religion to good ol' boy country & western to raving madman rock & roll.

Actually, Jerry Lee Lewis pretty well sums up those extremes by himself. Religion was deeply ingrained in young Jerry Lee: raised a Pentecostal, he even attended the Southwestern Bible Institute with an eye toward becoming a preacher, before he was expelled for playing hymns over a boogie-woogie bass(!) A tape of a "theological debate" he had with Sam Phillips is a testament to the inner battles that continued to haunt him. In the Sun studio to record his second hit, "Great Balls of Fire," Jerry has a sudden attack of conscience, brought on by the hell-fire images in the song he was about to sing. As the recording session grinds to a halt, Sam and Jerry debate whether one can sing rock & roll and be a true Christian at the same time. Sam sees no contradiction, but Jerry's answer is unequivocally NO: if you choose to pursue "worldly music," you'll find heaven's gates closed to you come Judgement Day. Or as Jerry put it, "Man, I got the Devil in me!" Truer words have rarely been spoken. The irony, of course, is that Jerry Lee Lewis *did* pursue worldly music, with a vengeance and with the passion of a man possessed. For Jerry Lee, there is no middle ground and, as if to prove it, he finally tears into the first take of "Great Balls of Fire," playing with a particularly demonic intensity and sounding for all the world like a man laughing at the face of eternal damnation—like a man who believes, just as surely as Robert Johnson, that he owed the Devil Himself for his extraordinary talent.

It's certainly no coincidence that the two great piano playing wildmen of rock & roll—Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard—were both tormented by their religious convictions and driven to manic excess by the guilt and the exhilarating freedom of ignoring them. One extreme seemed to feed the other, passionate belief fueling an equally passionate reaction. Jerry Lee played the "Devil's music" as if a Faustian bargain had made it his alone, and the reckless spontaneity of his music and flamboyant personality were the essence of rockabilly's freewheeling spirit. While Elvis invented rockabilly and Carl Perkins gave it a defined, even dignified, form, Jerry Lee Lewis gave it its very soul—the soul he sold for rock & roll.

Ferriday to Memphis

His own religious convictions notwithstanding, Jerry Lee (born Sept. 29, 1935) was the hell-raiser of the family, a redneck Eddie Haskell continually getting his poor cousins into trouble with his penchant for going places he didn't belong. Lewis found plenty of trouble, and his own version of "country boy discovers the blues," at Haney's Big House, the black club in Ferriday where he could hide in the rafters and watch the great barrelhouse piano players who floated up-river from New Orleans, adding their influences to those of his heroes Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Moon Mullican and Al Jolson. Lewis began performing in area clubs and then, with the arrival and inspiration of Elvis Presley, set his sights on Sun Records and Sam Phillips, who signed him in 1956 on the basis of both his solo talent and his usefulness as a session piano player. Lewis' first record, a cover of Ray Price's "Crazy Arms" backed with the self-penned "End of the Road," received little attention, but he did lend his inimitable piano style to several other Sun releases while waiting for a hit of his own, including Carl Perkins' "Matchbox" and "Put Your Cat Clothes On" and Billy Lee Riley's "Red Hot." As Jerry had no band of his own, Riley's Little Green Men (named to capitalize on Riley's regional hit, "Flying Saucers Rock & Roll") became Lewis' backup band as well, with Roland Janes on guitar, Jimmy Van Eaton on drums, and Jay Brown and Riley alternating on bass.

Shake, Baby, Shake!

"**Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On**" was Jerry Lee's first hit, a rock & roll classic recorded at the end of an otherwise unproductive session in February 1957. Recorded originally and obscurely by Roy Hall, and more memorably by Big Maybelle, Lewis' rowdy version has a huge sound enhanced by Sun's trademark slap-back echo which Sam Phillips, in an inspired moment, layered onto the piano and drums as well as the voice. Jerry Lee's "pumpin' piano" trademarks also appear in all their glory: the driving boogie bass figures, high pounding chords, flashy runs, sweeping glissandi and a sprawling, confident command of the entire keyboard.

"Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" also introduces a favorite Lewis device, a method of pacing tension and release that was particularly effective in live shows. In the extended middle section he pulls the band back ("let's get *real* low one time..."), drops to a near-whisper and nearly abandons the song itself to tell his pretty young listeners that "all you gotta do, honey, is kinda stand in one spot and wiggle around just a little bit... that's when you got somethin', ye-e-aah..." Then, almost as an aside, "... now let's go one time," and the full fury of the song kicks back in with a sweep up the keyboard and a triumphant "shake it, baby, shake!" "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" made everything else on the radio, save Little Richard, seem somewhat tame by comparison, and it was a shot of adrenaline for a rock market that was already starting to soften. Just as Elvis was beginning to seem like a nice guy after all, and newcomers like Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers held out hope for decency and melodies, Jerry Lee Lewis' frenzied, leering delivery and recalcitrant redneck image were a timely reminder of rock's raucous roots.

Lewis' great follow-up hit, "**Great Balls of Fire**," seems barely able to contain itself to a mere piece of plastic. Written by Otis Blackwell, author of "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up," the song might have sounded fairly innocuous had it ended up in

Elvis' hands. In Jerry Lee's it becomes a joyous surrender to temptation. Having exorcised the pangs of religious conscience that threatened to derail the recording session, he wrings out every ounce of lust and transcends the song itself with the sensual abandon of his delivery. Backed only by drums and his own piano, Lewis twists and bends the melody, glides into falsetto, trails off mischievously into thin air then dives back into song with a wonderfully elastic energy, while the piano and drums stop, start, push forward and pull back in perfect sync.

Another Otis Blackwell song, the aptly-titled "**Breathless**," followed "Great Balls of Fire" with an equally inspired performance full of sudden pauses, unexpected accents and dynamic shifts and pure, redemptive lust. The exciting spontaneity of the music owes much to the band's uncanny ability to follow the unpredictable Lewis, who never sang or played a song the same way twice. Jimmy Van Eaton's drumming was particularly important in creating the fluid feel of the records: "A lot of people try to copy Jerry Lee Lewis' sound, but they'll never copy it because they're trying to play a straight 4/4 beat when, in fact, it's a shuffle with a backbeat. That's the whole rhythm."[i] The huge, hammering rhythm section formed by Van Eaton's drums and Lewis' left-hand boogie runs was intensified still further by Sam Phillips' knack for achieving maximum effect from minimal resources.

"The Killer"

Jerry Lee Lewis was even more impressive in concert: a vintage Lewis performance was an exercise in controlled frenzy from one of rock's greatest showmen. "Controlled" may be too strong a word, however, for he often enough crossed the line into an *uncontrolled* frenzy unleashed on hapless piano benches, piano keys and piano lids, which rarely escaped intact or without a few sets of footprints as proof of their surrender. At the end of the show, after pummeling the piano into submission, he'd leap on top of it, hair flying and eyes bulging like a madman as he shouted out the final song. The television public got its first glimpse of Lewis in action on July 28, 1957, on the Steve Allen Show: "Viewers were shocked by the display—this boy appearing on national television and mistreating a fine instrument. He was out of control. And the audience loved it."[ii]

Chuck Berry may have detailed rock's attack on High Culture in "Roll Over, Beethoven," but the image of Jerry Lee Lewis—the Killer, as he was called—savagely attacking a concert grand delivered a more powerful and threatening punch. The two stars had a chance to fight it out, in fact, on a memorable Alan Freed package show which Berry was chosen to close, much to Lewis' chagrin. Determined to make Berry rue the day he had to follow the Killer onstage, Jerry Lee played the show of his life, poured out his energy and soul and, when things were reaching a climax, poured a can of kerosene over the piano, lit it, and broke into "Great Balls of Fire!" As he walked away from the smoldering piano and disbelieving audience, he smiled at Freed and Berry and quietly said "Follow that..." (There has been some dispute about whether this story is actually rooted in fact, but if it's not true, it ought to be.)

The Fall

Lewis was at the peak of his formidable powers in 1958, viewed as Elvis' only serious rival—even by the recently drafted King himself. Lewis' outlandish image was a perfect foil to Elvis' increasing "respectability," and he seemed primed and eager to fill the void left by Elvis' absence. Instead, his next rock & roll hit, "High School Confidential," was his last, thanks to his marriage to his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Brown. Lewis married Myra, his third wife, in December 1957 at the ripe old age of 22.[iii] While certainly odd, such a marriage was not as uncommon in the South as it might have seemed, though it *was* complicated by the fact that Jerry had neglected to divorce his second wife! At any rate, things might have been fine if Jerry Lee had kept quiet about it. Instead, unable to keep quiet about anything, he flaunted his new bride before the press and public on an important tour of England in May 1958. Outraged by Lewis and his "child-bride," newspapers savaged Lewis and angry crowds heckled and picketed his appearances until the tour was finally scrapped.

The backlash of moral indignation quickly spread to America, where the media and scandalized public seized the chance to bring down another rock & roll degenerate who was corrupting their youth. Just a year after "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On," Lewis' career fell victim to a ruthlessly effective boycott that killed his record sales and media exposure. Fearing the public's reaction, and the loss of their advertising revenue, radio stations wouldn't play his records, stores were afraid to stock them and TV shows and concert promoters refused to book him. (Dick Clark, for one, considers bowing to the commercial pressures that fueled Lewis' blacklisting to be the biggest mistake of his career. Clark liked Lewis, who had appeared on "American Bandstand" several times, but he buckled under when the show's sponsors threatened to pull out if he booked him again. Clark says now that, if he had it to do over again, he would book Jerry Lee every week until the boycott was crushed, and he did, later, go out of his way to help Jerry get his career going again.)

Middle Age Crazy

Jerry Lee kept recording great records for Sun, but no one seemed to notice. A switch to Mercury Records in 1963 did little to improve matters, despite some excellent releases like 1964's "I'm on Fire." The early sixties were bleak years, spent drinking and playing the county fairs, but his live shows remained as exciting as ever. He was eventually able to reestablish himself as a headlining act in Europe, winning back even the British fans. And though America may have turned its back on him, Jerry Lee Lewis never lost his biggest fan and greatest admirer—himself. The stubborn, arrogant pride that precipitated his fall from grace also got him through the hard times with his dignity intact. He refused to apologize for marrying a woman he loved, and never pandered to the public with syrupy ballads or Las Vegas routines. Live recordings from the early sixties attest to the undiminished energy of an unrepentant Lewis—a man who knew he was the greatest of them all, and proved it night after night.

A mid-sixties move to the country & western market finally revived his career and established Lewis as a country star, with self-referential hits like "Another Place, Another Time," "Middle Age Crazy," "39 and Holding" and "What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made a Loser Out of Me)." It was not really a major shift for Lewis, as he had always recorded country songs along with the rock & roll at Sun, though he now abandoned the back-to-basics Sun style in favor of the slick, string and choir-laden "modern Nashville" sound. With country music and audiences as his home base, Jerry Lee continued to record new material, with no intention of living out his days as a mere oldies act. (He can, however, still fire off a mean "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" when so moved.)

Lewis' legacy far transcends his record sales and *Billboard* chart listings. He was one of rock's true pioneers—an original rock & roll spirit who refused to be tamed. Driven by a supreme confidence in his inexhaustible talent, he has survived through personal tragedies that would have defeated weaker souls, including the boycott and blacklisting, the death of his two sons, severe drug and alcohol problems, frequent run-ins with the police, press and IRS, and two serious illnesses that nearly killed him. Whether you love or detest his personality, his hell-bent determination to live his life and play his music the way he chooses is inspiring. As the title of one of his later country-rock hits put it, "I Am What I Am (Not What You Want Me to Be)." With so many of the original stars gone or—like rock & roll itself—creeping respectably into old age, it's somehow comforting to know that Jerry Lee Lewis is still, well, Jerry Lee Lewis: a living legacy of the original, wild-eyed spirit of rock & roll.

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[i] Jimmy Van Eaton, from June, 1987 *Modern Drummer* magazine interview.

[ii] Myra Lewis and Murray Silver, "Great Balls of Fire," (New York: Quill, 1982), p. 79.

[iii] To add further insult to injury, Myra was the daughter of Lewis' bass player, Jay Brown. Myra and Jerry Lee were divorced in 1970.

JOHNNY CASH

The "Man in Black" was never really a rock & roller, but he has remained surprisingly popular with younger rock audiences through the years, thanks to his craggy, enigmatic persona and to the world-weary directness of his best music. Cash was a star of the Sun roster from 1955 to 1958, though his tastes and talents led him away from rockabilly toward a storytelling country-folk style that better suited his resonant voice and adult sensibilities. Backed by guitarist Luther Perkins and bassist Marshall Grant, the **Tennessee Two**, Cash recorded several country classics at Sun, including "**Folsom Prison Blues**," "Cry, Cry, Cry" and "I Walk the Line."

Cash's music had little of rockabilly's manic energy, though his records are sparse and streamlined in classic Sun style and feature slapback echo, slapping bass and other distinctive Sun traits, along with a distinctly southern wild side (consider the singer in "Folsom Prison Blues" who "I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die...") that formed the basis of Cash' desperado image. In contrast to the trebly, excited sound of the Sun rockers, however, Cash's voice was deep and mature, resigned rather than rebellious, while Luther Perkins presented a similarly subdued mix of choked low-string melodies and single-string solos.

Cash and Sam Phillips experimented with more pop-oriented songs and arrangements, such as "Ballad of a Teenage Queen," but Cash's heart remained rooted in country music while Phillips' attention turned more toward Jerry Lee Lewis' rock & roll career. Cash left Sun in 1958 for Columbia Records, along with his friend Carl Perkins, and promptly plummeted into a decade-long drug and alcohol binge. He became a country superstar in the 1960's nonetheless, and built upon his Memphis lessons to popularize a leaner, rawer "outlaw" alternative to the Nashville country establishment. At a time when the country establishment and the rock world seemed like polar opposites, Cash retained a kinship with rock & roll reflected in his vocal duets with friend Bob Dylan, on Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* album, and in his insistence on booking rock artists on a television program he hosted in 1969-70. (Dylan, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Derek & The Dominos, Creedence Clearwater Revival and other progressive voices received rare network exposure on the *Johnny Cash Show*.) A true survivor, forty harrowing years beyond his Sun days, Cash remains a larger-than-life hero able to transcend time, changing styles and the limits of his own talent to forge a distinctly American voice.

CHARLIE RICH

Charlie Rich recorded for Sun's subsidiary Phillips label during the late 1950's, though he never achieved the sales or success he deserved. Sam Phillips often remarked that Rich had the voice and talent to outshine Elvis, but only 1960's "Lonely Weekends" managed to make the charts. Rich largely earned his keep at Sun as a session pianist and staff songwriter. The furious "**Break Up**," for example, was written for and recorded by Jerry Lee Lewis in 1959 and promptly assigned to the oblivion of the Lewis media boycott. Rich's demotape of the song is classic Sun rockabilly, lean and raw and driven by Rich's virtuoso piano, which outmaneuvers Jerry Lee at every turn, and a voice that does indeed top even Elvis for range and power.

Charlie Rich could never be confined to "rockabilly," however, or to any single style. His bluesy piano playing, jazzy embellishments and soulful voice defy easy labels. In "**Who Will the Next Fool Be**," for example, Rich turns his phrases like a great soul singer while his piano mixes country honky-tonk with jazz, blues and gospel inflections set against a pop-style backing chorus and a country-soul band accompaniment. At his best, Rich is a great stylist who leaves a personal imprint on any song he touches. He seems most akin to Ray Charles, another great style-blending stylist, and his emotionally direct songs are proof of country music's claim to be "white man's soul music."

Rich signed with Smash Records in 1965 and had another run at the charts that year with the novelty song "Mohair Sam." He moved on to Epic Records in 1967, where he was teamed with Nashville producer Billy Sherrill. The pairing produced a string of successful records, climaxing in 1973 with "Behind Closed Doors" and "The Most Beautiful Girl," which helped establish the country-pop crossover style known as "countrypolitan" and paved the way for other country crossovers like Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. The "Silver Fox" clung tenuously to the good graces of the country establishment in the mid-seventies then fell back out of favor and into his own idiosyncratic musical world. Unfortunately, aside from the few hits, Charlie Rich remains for most a sadly neglected and undiscovered treasure.

ROY ORBISON

Roy Orbison's first Sun single, "**Ooby Dooby**," was pure rockabilly—a rather surprising start for a singer famous for heavily orchestrated, near-operatic ballads that occupy the opposite end of the musical spectrum from Sun's sparse intensity. Like Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison was never quite comfortable as a rockabilly singer, but he certainly made a valiant effort at it. "Ooby Dooby" reached #59 on the national pop charts in 1956, and though none of his successive Sun releases came any closer to hit status, his tenure at Sun as a recording artist and house songwriter was a crucial learning experience and morale booster for the shy Texan. Orbison concentrated on songwriting after leaving Sun in 1958 (he wrote "Claudette" for the Everly Brothers) before rekindling his singing career in 1960 on Monument Records with "Only the Lonely."

The Sun Roster

Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich and Roy Orbison were joined on the Sun rockabilly roster by a host of less talented but equally enthusiastic performers. The very best of the Sun artists left a permanent mark on rock & roll, but even the lesser lights made fun, honest music and occasionally transcended their limitations through sheer exuberance. It's a tribute to Sam Phillips that his artists developed such varied and distinct individual styles while always retaining an immediately recognizable "Sun Sound."

Billy Lee Riley and The Little Green Men were the house band at Sun, available to singers (like Jerry Lewis) who had no band of their own. In the spotlight, Riley was typical of Sun's second string: not blessed with a particularly great voice or original talent, he still managed to make good, lively records like "**My Gal is Red Hot**" and the novelty hit "Flying Saucers Rock & roll" (both from 1957) that captured the infectious enthusiasm of a hot Memphis Saturday night. Warren Smith ("Ubangi Stomp"), Charlie Feathers ("Defrost Your Heart"), Sonny Burgess ("Ain't Got a Thing"), Carl Mann ("Mona Lisa"), Bill Justis ("Raunchy," one of the first rock & roll instrumental hits), Harold Jenkins (who later took the name Conway Twitty) and a small army of others had their moments at the Sun microphone and on the endless string of one-nighters across the South. While a talent like Elvis or Jerry Lee could forge a personal style that transcended rockabilly's ultimately limited form, the rowdy voices that filled out the Sun roster reflected the music's populist appeal as a southern equivalent of doo-wop, accessible to anybody with a little talent and a lot of energy and a burning desire to sing their souls and forget their troubles for a while.

Sunset

The decline of Sun Records was partly the result of Sam Phillips' knack for losing his top artists to bigger labels, but it was more a reflection of the changing popular tastes at the end of the 1950's. As rock & roll moved from the domain of independents like Sun to the bigger stakes of the major labels, the music industry tightened its grip and sent the pop charts on a downward spiral toward the watered-down pop of the early sixties "teen idol" era. The rough edges, regional flavors and spontaneous feel that made rock & roll so exciting were gradually smoothed over, and Sam Phillips, already demoralized by the Jerry Lee Lewis boycott, simply lost interest. He quit making records in 1963 and sold the Sun catalog in 1969.

In its day, Phillips' tiny studio at 706 Union Avenue was witness to some extraordinary moments, from the transported intensity of Howlin' Wolf to the Revelation of "That's All Right," but none summed up Sun's impact better than an amazing "family" gathering in December 1956. The setting was Carl Perkins' first recording session following his car wreck and long convalescence. On hand were Johnny Cash, welcoming his buddy back to the studio, and Jerry Lee Lewis, a Sun newcomer hired to play piano on the session. The illustrious trio became the "million dollar quartet" when Elvis Presley, by then a superstar at RCA, joined the well-wishers. Sun's biggest stars—past, present and future—soon found themselves huddled around a piano singing gospel and country songs from their shared southern past. The famous picture of that incredible

scene is a happy reminder of the legacy of Sun Records and its farsighted owner. Sam Phillips was in the first group of inductees to the "forefathers" division of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, a much deserved recognition for the man who contributed so much to the development of rock & roll.

Rockabilly Beyond Sun

THE JOHNNY BURNETTE ROCK & ROLL TRIO

Sam Phillips could only sign and record a select few from the steady stream—often approaching flood levels—of singers and groups that turned up at his door. The Johnny Burnette Rock & Roll Trio was one of the many acts Phillips auditioned and turned down, though their credentials were certainly impeccable: they were from Memphis, went to high school with Elvis and even worked at the Crown Electric Company with their old schoolmate. The Trio finally signed with Brunswick/Coral in 1956 after a winning performance on Ted Mack's *Amateur Hour* show. They were produced by Owen Bradley in the "Bradley Barn" studio in Nashville, marking one of Nashville's first forays into rockabilly, though they met with only slightly more commercial success than Bradley's Buddy Holly recordings of the same year.

Singer Johnny Burnette, bassist Dorsey Burnette and lead guitarist Paul Burlison represented the lunatic fringe of rockabilly, thanks to Johnny's high-octane vocals and a aggressively distorted guitar sound Burlison used on several recordings—a "fuzz" tone he stumbled onto when a tube in his amplifier shook loose, then created intentionally by loosening the tube for subsequent recordings.

"Honey Hush," "Rock Therapy," "Tear It Up," "Eager Beaver Baby" and other Rock & Roll Trio recordings are now revivalist favorites, but the group received little attention at the time and disbanded within a year. They left a lasting mark, however, with "**Train Kept A-Rollin'**," an inspired set of sexual metaphors and musical madness and that has been frequently covered by over-the-edge bands of later eras, most notably the Yardbirds, Aerosmith and Led Zeppelin, who opened their early shows with the song. Originally recorded by R&B bandleader Tiny Bradshaw, the Burnette's recording features all of the classic rockabilly traits and Elvis-isms taken to a deranged extreme, climaxing in a bizarre guitar solo played in octaves with a heavily distorted sound and a snaking modal melody that sounds as if it was transported back in time from a psychedelic raga-rock song.

The Burnette brothers moved to California in 1957 to concentrate on songwriting and wrote several hits for Ricky Nelson and others before Johnny changed styles and reemerged as a pop singer in 1960 with "You're Sixteen." Johnny drowned in a fishing accident in 1964. Dorsey was a well-respected country artist until his death in 1979, while Burlison has chosen to remain in relative seclusion. Johnny's son Rocky ("Tired of Toein' the Line") and Dorsey's son Billy have carried on the Burnette name in the rock world.

GENE VINCENT

Gene Vincent was the original fifties hood: the black-leather biker with dirty, greasy hair and a mind and singing style to match. Unlike Elvis, he seemed threatening both onstage and off, smashing up hotel rooms, scowling at the press and public and definitely *not* talking about how much he loved his mother and his country... Vincent was actually, by all accounts, a perfectly nice guy, but he played up his rock wildman role to great effect and even managed to incorporate a crippled leg into his act. After first attempting to minimize his handicap (the result of a motorcycle accident), Vincent chose instead to exaggerate it, and took to dragging his bad leg behind him to the horror and delight of his audience in an early Alice Cooper-ish bit of macabre rock theater.

Gene Vincent had Elvis Presley to thank, even more directly than most, for his style and career. In the wake of RCA's huge success with Elvis, other major record labels suddenly displayed a newfound interest in the music they had fought and condemned so vehemently (if you can't beat it, at least make a profit off it). Capitol Records held a contest to find "their Elvis," and found and promptly signed Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, largely on the basis of his similarity to the King. (Vincent's backing band was named after President Eisenhower's golfing cap.)

Vincent scored quickly for Capitol with "**Be-Bop-a-Lula**," a Top Ten hit in the summer of 1956. Whether it really fooled Mrs. Presley or not, Vincent's voice certainly owed much to the Elvis model. Vincent took the rebel side Elvis to a dramatic extreme, exaggerating the brooding demeanor and agitated sensuality that Elvis always balanced with a playful, self-mocking response. (Buddy Holly, by contrast, took Elvis' model in an opposite, playful direction.) Vincent's panting delivery of "Be-Bop-a-Lula" has a sinister edge that transcends the song's inane lyrics, while the Blue Caps provide a darkly-lit aural backdrop, with a hushed tempo, heavy echo and brushed drums that lend an eerie jazz tinge to the proceedings.

The suggestive lyrics and lecherous delivery, heavily reverberated vocals, brushed drums and spacious, jazzy sound of "Be-Bop-a-Lula" were used to equally striking effect on "Woman Love," "Race With the Devil" and other early Vincent efforts, all featuring the searing guitar work of **Cliff Gallup**. (Gallup tired of rock & roll life and was replaced in 1957 by Johnny Meeks, who played lead guitar on "Lotta Lovin'" and "Dance to the Bop," both relatively minor hits.)

Unfortunately, Capitol Records didn't have much of a taste for rock & roll or much of a talent for promoting it. (A few years later, Capitol would drag its feet for a full year before agreeing to sign and promote the Beatles.) Repeated record bannings and fines and court battles over obscenity charges didn't help matters much, and Vincent's career quickly floundered in America. He did find a second home and wildly enthusiastic audiences in England, and did quite well there until a tragic car wreck in London killed his friend Eddie Cochran and badly re-injured Vincent's crippled leg. His life in the sixties was a depressing slide through pain killers, alcoholism and a series of unsuccessful comeback attempts. He died in 1971 at the age of 36, but his image still haunts and gives shape to rockabilly's timeless rebellion.

Rockabilly's Legacy

The rough edges of rockabilly had been effectively smoothed over by the end of the 1950's. An authentic "grass roots" music, rockabilly's influence and offshoots far outlasted its short-lived Moment as the truest rock & roll. The instrumental records by influential guitarists **Duane "Mr. Twang" Eddy** ("Rebel Rouser," "Ramrod") and fuzz-tone pioneer **Link Wray** ("Rumble," "Rawhide"), for example, had a distinct rockabilly edge to them. So, too, did Dale Hawkins' 1957 hit "Suzy Q," which featured 15-year-old **James Burton**'s stunning swamp-rock guitar.[i] Burton later added a classy rockabilly touch to many of Ricky Nelson's records and was guitarist and bandleader for Elvis' comeback bands.

Wildman **Ronnie Hawkins** had a 1959 hit with "Mary Lou" and carried the spirit of rockabilly into the early sixties with his backing band, the Hawks—later to become The Band. The Everly Brothers' country roots brought a subtle rockabilly feel to many of their records, and Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran each began as Elvis-styled rockabilly singers before forging their own styles. Many mainstream country & western singers, such as Conway Twitty and George Jones, went through a rockabilly period; and on the other side of the Atlantic, nearly all of the English guitar heroes of the 1960's credited the rockabilly pioneers alongside the blues players in their pantheon of heroes and influences. (Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, for example, once boasted that he never went on tour without a tape of Elvis' Sun Sessions and the inspiration of Scotty Moore.)

Rockabilly was a liberating music for young southern whites, who could now sing and play with an intensity and sexuality that had previously seemed reserved for blues and R&B musicians. A lucky few managed to get recording contracts and national exposure, but for every one that managed to make it there were hundreds of equally spirited singers and bands playing every night in the small clubs, bars and desolate roadhouses that dotted the landscape of the South. Rockabilly's spirit of fun, rebellion and refreshing simplicity remain eternally young, as the many revivals of its sound and spirit have shown. Like the blues, it was a uniquely American music and it remains a crucial continuing impulse for rock & roll.

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[i] Creedence Clearwater Revival had their first hit with a direct cover of Susie Q.

NEW ORLEANS

A few hundred miles and several musical styles downriver from Memphis, the great melting pot of New Orleans made its own unique contribution to the development of rock & roll. The Crescent City's distinct musical tradition was shaped by a long history of cultural crossbreeding and a by a spirit of easygoing fun that made for a natural leap into the popular market. Famous for being one of the birthplaces of Jazz, New Orleans also had a rich heritage of rhythm & blues styles nurtured by a civically-mandated wild streak and a flourishing club scene that provided an outlet for all types of music (not to mention behavior). While the Memphis rockabillies made a screaming break from their country & western roots to create their own brand of rock & roll, the New Orleans rockers simply kept playing the R&B they'd played for years and felt little need to rebel against their proud heritage. As Fats Domino put it, "What they call 'rock & roll' now is just rhythm & blues—I've been playing it for fifteen years in New Orleans."[i] By the time Domino crossed over to the pop charts in 1955, the French Quarter clubs had long been filled with hard-driving, big beat sounds that needed little altering to be called "rock & roll."

"<u>The Cradle of Jazz</u>"

The rich, varied cultural textures of New Orleans were shaped by centuries of intermingling among the American Indian, Spanish, French, British, African, Caribbean, Latin American and other peoples who settled in or, in the case of the slaves, were forced to settle in the bustling port city at the mouth of the Mississippi. In contrast to other parts of the South, where slaves came predominantly from Africa, many of the slaves that came to New Orleans were brought from the West Indies and Latin America. Along with the early Spanish influence, this Latin influence established a link to South American customs, such as the Mardi Gras celebrations, and to the rhythms and flavors of Latin music which figured prominently in New Orleans rhythm & blues.

Music has always been an integral part of New Orleans life—a perpetual soundtrack for a city that loves festivals, parades and any excuse for a party. The European tradition of marching parade bands became an essential ingredient in the festivities, especially at Mardi Gras time and in the city's famous funeral processions, where a solemn march to the burial ground was followed by a spirited romp back into town. The bands were important training grounds for future jazz musicians, and the parade band tradition established the lively beat and rhythmic orientation that characterizes all New Orleans music. (As the seminal New Orleans drummer Earl Palmer recalled, "you could always tell a New Orleans drummer the minute you heard him play his bass drum because he'd have that parade beat connotation."[ii])

By the end of the 19th century, marching bands made up of blacks and Creoles had equaled and surpassed the white bands in numbers and talent. Segregation laws passed in 1894 forced together the two previously distinct and antagonistic social classes of "uncultured" blacks and "Creoles of color" (people of mixed blood who had been trained in the European tradition and had enjoyed a privileged status). The interaction between the two groups wedded African-derived elements—the improvisatory melodic styles and syncopated rhythms of the black folk traditions—with the harmonies,

instrumentation and regular meters (the groupings of beats against which the syncopations made themselves felt) of European tradition. This blending of traditions was gradually felt in the parade band music: the drum beats and march melodies grew less rigid and more inventive and the march melodies were embellished with bent and "blue" notes and set against improvised countermelodies and syncopated "second lines."

In a nutshell, this mixture of European and African-American elements laid the groundwork for the creation of ragtime and jazz. The piano-based ragtime style evolved in the 1890's from the marches and the from the rhythms of popular dances. As its popularity grew, instrumental "orchestrated ragtime" developed out of the parade bands and, with a healthy dose of the blues thrown in, formed the basis for classic New Orleans jazz. The music thrived in the red-light district known as "Storyville," then spilled over into the legitimate clubs and illegitimate pleasure houses after the Storyville bordellos were officially closed in 1917. And if a club owner couldn't afford an entire band, a piano player would suffice to keep the spirits up and the dancers moving. The "barrelhouse" piano players mixed jazz, ragtime, blues and boogie over a dance beat powerful enough to bring the most broken-down piano back to life. Most of all, the music—like the city—was Fun. The bleak lyrics and desolate mood of the guitar blues from the surrounding rural regions had no place in the "Big Easy," where even funerals were cause for celebration.

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[i]Fats Domino quote from "Rock abd Roll: The Early Days" videotape (Archive Films, 1984).
[ii]Max Weinberg, "The Big Beat," (Chicago: Contemporary, 1984), p. 89.

NEW ORLEANS RHYTHM & BLUES

While "Dixieland" and later jazz styles dominated the New Orleans music scene until World War II, club blues and barrelhouse piano styles charted a parallel course and spawned a unique style of rhythm & blues in the post-war years. The Latin flavor and rhythms, the bass-heavy boogie feel, the rhythmic variety, the piano and sax-dominated band instrumentation and the spirited ensemble playing of traditional New Orleans styles combined to give the city's R&B a distinctive sound and character.

Behind the Scenes

Jump-blues singer **Roy Brown** scored the city's first big rhythm & blues hit in 1947 with his self-penned "Good Rockin' Tonight," released on the DeLuxe label. ("Good Rockin' Tonight" was also a hit the following year for Wynonie Harris on Cincinnati's King label. Elvis turned it into a rockabilly rave-up six years later.) DeLuxe's success with New Orleans artists inspired other record labels to take notice of the city and her abundant talent, most notably the California-based **Imperial** and **Specialty** labels, which were the recording homes of Fats Domino and Little Richard, respectively, and were the dominant presences in New Orleans through the 1950's. Unlike other musical centers, New Orleans was slow to establish hometown record labels, which forced the local artists to depend on outside labels for many years. In fact, the city had only one major recording *studio*: the tiny J&M studio run by **Cosimo Matassa** (later called simply Cosimo's), where all of the city's great R&B and rock & roll recordings were made from the forties through the sixties. Matassa's "live in the studio" approach was geared to capturing a great performance with no tricks or gimmicks, and though his studio was far from modern, even in those days, the sound he captured still sounds remarkably fresh.

Bandleader **Dave Bartholomew** was another behind-the-scenes figure who played a crucial role in the development of New Orleans R&B. Bartholomew's crack band was very popular in the city's clubs and, more importantly, formed the core group of sessionmen at Matassa's studio. The tight-knit **Studio Band** changed personnel only gradually over the years and always had a keen musical rapport and a gutsy sound that inspired the singers they backed and contributed much to the success of their records. Bartholomew himself achieved his greatest fame as a songwriter and arranger, working independently at first, producing sessions for Shirley and Lee, Smiley Lewis and Lloyd Price, then as the musical director of Imperial Records' New Orleans operations, where he secured his place in history with his collaboration with Fats Domino.

Fats Domino hit the R&B charts in 1950 with "The Fat Man," featuring the Bartholomew band, and was a major R&B star through the early fifties before crossing over to the pop market in 1955. Domino's success and the distinctive sound of his music further heightened interest in New Orleans. Matassa and the Studio Band found themselves in great demand, and Bartholomew's bass-propelled arrangements formed the blueprint for the next decade of New Orleans recordings. The emphasis on piano, saxophones and bass riffs set New Orleans music quite apart from the trebly, guitar-dominated sound of the rockabillies and the blues-derived guitar emphasis of Chicago's Chess Records rockers, Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley. The rhythmic inventiveness and

variety of New Orleans styles also stands in sharp contrast to the more one-dimensional, repetitive rhythms of most early rock & roll.

Professor Longhair

Professor Longhair was New Orleans' most beloved musical figure and the patriarch of a line of great piano players—Fats Domino, Huey "Piano" Smith, Allen Toussaint, Art Neville, Dr. John and many others—who anchored the New Orleans R&B sound. Born Henry Roeland Byrd in 1918, the self-taught "Fess" developed a thoroughly unconventional approach that mixed jazz, ragtime, blues, boogie-woogie, calypso, rhumbas and all types of dancebeats into a carefree carnival sound and style that embodied the spirit of the city. He described his own style as a "gumbo" and a mixture of "offbeat Spanish beats and Calypso downbeats" topped by his boisterously rowdy singing.[i] Longhair's highly syncopated **boogie-rhumba** style—boogie bass lines set to a rhumba beat—influenced Dave Bartholomew's bass-driven arrangements and became a widely recognized New Orleans trademark.

Professor Longhair began playing professionally in 1949 and quickly achieved a cult status that he was never able to parlay into national recognition. "She Ain't Got No Hair" (later re-recorded as "Bald Head") and "Mardi Gras in New Orleans" were among his first recordings, released on the Texas-based Star Talent label. He recorded "**Tipitina**," one of his best-known songs, for Atlantic Records in 1953, then went on to record for a dozen other labels, only rarely producing a record that moved beyond the "local hit" category. After many obscure years of menial work and ill-health, Professor Longhair was finally rediscovered in the early seventies. He reclaimed his rightful spot with a triumphant performance at the city's Jazz and Heritage Festival, and he remained the revered elder statesman of New Orleans R&B until his death in 1980.

Smiley Lewis

Among the many Domino followers in the early fifties was Smiley Lewis, who was also on the Imperial label, produced by Bartholomew and backed by Bartholomew's band. Although he was never able to break into the rock market, Lewis had a sizable R&B hit in 1952 with "The Bells Are Ringing," and hit again in 1955 with the original version of "**I Hear You Knocking**." Lewis' songs have tended to be better known in their cover versions: Gale Storm's 1955 cover of "I Hear You Knocking," for example, made it to the Top Five on the pop charts, as did Dave Edmunds' 1971 version, while Lewis' "One Night" was covered by Elvis Presley in 1958.

Lloyd Price

Lloyd Price recorded for Specialty Records, whose owner, Art Rupe, had come to New Orleans in 1952 in search of his own Fats Domino-styled singer. Rupe discovered the 17-year-old Price at the end of an otherwise fruitless talent audition, and was struck by his intense and pleading vocal delivery. "**Lawdy Miss Clawdy**" was recorded with Bartholomew's band and features Fats himself on piano. The record was a #1 R&B hit, and was popular with young white listeners as well (Elvis was one of many who later covered the song). After a stint in the army, Price switched to ABC Records and scored a number of pop hits in the late fifties, including 1959's "**Stagger Lee**," a hard-driving

update of the traditional African-American folk song "Stagolee." Price actually did two versions of the song, since Stagger Lee's cold-blooded murder of Billy—while the chorus chants "Go Stagger Lee!"—in the original was deemed a bit much for impressionable pop ears. Price's other hits, such as "Personality" and "I'm Gonna Get Married," were done in a pop style with syrupy choirs and slick productions that were far removed from his New Orleans roots.

Guitar Slim

Specialty Records also struck gold in New Orleans with Guitar Slim (born Eddie Jones), a blues guitarist and singer, and hence something of a rarity among New Orleans frontmen. Slim hit #1 on the R&B charts in 1954 with "**Things That I Used to Do**," an ingenious wedding of Slim's gritty voice and guitar blues to a classic New Orleans R&B band backing. The man responsible for the unique blend was none other than Ray Charles, who arranged and played piano on the record. (Charles was strongly impressed by his visits to the city in the early fifties and by his work in Matassa's studio, which inspired him to start his own band and to take his own music in a new, rootsier direction.)

Guitar Slim was a famously flashy performer and an inventive guitarist who exploited the full range of effects then available with the electric guitar. Fellow New Orleans artist Al Reed recalls Slim's live act: "...this guy had cords on his guitar that were something like 200 feet long. This guy would play on stage with his band, he would get off the stage, walk out of the door at the club, go out into the middle of the street, still playing guitar and never drop a beat, *never* drop a beat... he had an electric sound like you never heard and they would open the club doors wide so that the sound could just go in and out of the club, and he would draw people off the street."[ii] Guitar Slim followed "Things That I Used to Do" with "The Story of My Life," then shifted his base to Specialty's studios in California, where he continued recording in rather spiritless fashion. Slim never regained his stride, and died of alcoholism in 1959 at the age of 32.

Larry Williams

Larry Williams was a New Orleans native with a job as Lloyd Price's valet and a singing style strongly influenced by Little Richard, both of which helped get him signed to Specialty Records. Williams launched his career with a 1957 cover of Price's "Just Because," then began writing his own Little Richard-style tunes full of rhyming nonsense lyrics and lots of energy. He had a succession of moderate hits through 1957 and 1958, including "Short Fat Fanny," "Bony Moronie," "You Bug Me, Baby" and "**Dizzy Miss Lizzie**." Williams was all but forgotten in America when the Beatles revived his name by covering three of his songs: "Dizzy Miss Lizzie," "Slow Down" and "Bad Boy," all sung by Williams fan John Lennon (who also recorded "Bony Moronie" on his solo *Rock 'N' Roll* album).

Shirley and Lee

"The Sweethearts of the Blues," Shirley and Lee, recorded for the California-based Aladdin label. They began their career in 1952 with "I'm Gone," followed by "Shirley Come Back to Me," "Shirley's Back," "Lee Goofed," "Feel So Good" and various other installments of their romance. Backed by Matassa's Studio Band, the pair

recorded a number of R&B hits built around their alternating declarations of love and highlighted by Shirley's endearing buzzsaw of a voice. They finally hit pop charts in 1956 with "**Let the Good Times Roll**," a New Orleans classic and a wonderful mixture of teenage innocence and breathless eroticism. As Shirley and Lee trade verses, the song alternates between a humorously stilted circus rhythm and a swinging sax riff and dance beat, then collapses into sparse repeating downbeats for the bridge section: "feel so good when you're home, come on baby, rock me all night long!" Shirley and Lee continued as a team until 1963, but their remaining hits never equaled the inspiration of "Let the Good Times Roll."[iii]

Clarence "Frogman" Henry

With Clarence "Frogman" Henry, Chicago's Chess Records tapped into New Orleans via its Argo subsidiary. Henry's first hit, 1957's "**Ain't Got No Home**," was in the gimmicky novelty vein into which New Orleans records often tended to fall. Henry sings the three verses of "Ain't Got No Home" with three different voices, singing first in his normal voice, then in falsetto and finally with an inhaling, playground joke voice to illustrate the story of the lonely boy, lonely girl and lonely frog that "ain't got no home." The croaking voice gave him his nickname, which proved to be more of a hindrance than a help since he had no intention of making a career of singing like a frog. Henry hit again in 1961 with the elegant "But I Do" and "You Always Hurt the One You Love," before dropping back into the local club scene.[iv]

Huey "Piano" Smith & the Clowns

Huey "Piano" Smith & the Clowns recorded for Ace Records, the first prominent local label to appear in New Orleans. Huey Smith was a veteran sessionman, songwriter and performer, and a direct piano descendent of Professor Longhair. He also inherited Longhair's playful sense of humor, and turned his "Clowns" recordings and live shows into one long party. The Clowns were one of New Orlean's most popular live acts, and though their crowd-pleasing singalongs didn't always transfer well to the studio, their records were pure fun in the best New Orleans tradition. Their one pop hit, 1959's "**Don't You Just Know It**," is driven by Smith's piano playing and a chorus of alternating voices singing partytime gibberish (like the stirring "aah-ha-ha-ha, gooba, gooba, gooba, gooba") in shouted unisons and rowdy call-and-response.

Ironically, Huey "Piano" Smith & the Clowns' greatest record didn't even bear their name when it was released. "**Sea Cruise**" was written by Smith and recorded by the Clowns in 1959, with Huey on lead vocals. Ace sensed a massive hit and, eager to establish itself as a prominent label, increased its odds by keeping the Clowns' explosive backing tracks but replacing Smith's rather quirky vocals with white singer **Frankie Ford** (who turned in a fine performance).

"Sea Cruise" opens with the sound of ship's bells and foghorns that set a maritime mood and return periodically in a demented touch of genius. An irresistible bass & sax riff rumbles to life out of the bells and horns, joined by the kinetic energy of Huey Smith's double-time calypso piano. Although it was something of a stolen hit, "Sea Cruise" is a masterpiece of good times and great musicianship, and a high water mark for New Orleans R&B.

Fats and *Little*: Two Sides of the New Orleans Coin

"The Fat Man," "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" and "Things That I Used to Do" were a few of the R&B hits that focused attention on New Orleans and laid a groundwork for things to come. The advent of rock & roll opened new markets to the New Orleans musicians, who saw the "new" sounds as anything but new, and viewed rock & roll as more of a challenge than a threat. In 1955, the city provided rock & roll with two of its first true giants: Fats Domino and Little Richard.

Fats Domino was the homegrown hero with a solid R&B career under his belt by the time he crossed over into the pop charts with "Ain't That a Shame." Little Richard, from Georgia, was one of the many "outsiders" sent to New Orleans by their record companies to capture the sound of the city and its famous studio and sessionmen. Their styles and temperaments couldn't have been less similar: Fats' music always straddled the vague line between R&B and rock & roll while Little Richard eagerly plunged across it. But both men benefited greatly from the New Orleans sound that drives their records and makes them more closely related than it might seem. Inspired by their examples, many other New Orleans artists took aim at the rock market, but none matched the success and far-reaching influence of the two pillars of New Orleans' contribution to rock & roll.

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[i]Arnold Shaw, "Honkers and Shouters," (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 492.
[ii]John Broven, "Walking to New Orleans," (Sussex, England: Blues Unlimited, 1974), p. 54.
[iii]Shirley made an unlikely comeback as "Shirley and Company" in 1975 with the disco hit "Shame, Shame, Shame," co-written and produced by fellow veteran Sylvia Robinson (of Mickey & Sylvia, who had a 1956 hit with "Love Is Strange").
[iv]"But I Do" was written by Bobby Charles, who also wrote "Walking to New Orleans" for Fats Domino, and wrote and recorded the original "See You Later, Alligator," later a hit for Bill Haley.

FATS DOMINO

Antoine "Fats" Domino was born on May 10, 1929, in New Orleans, the city he still calls home. A quintessential New Orleans musician, Domino became the city's biggest homegrown star and remains a joyful ambassador of the New Orleans sound. The success of "The Fat Man" established Domino as an R&B star, and the crossover success of "Ain't It a Shame" turned him into a rock & roll headliner, though even then he made a point of calling his music "rhythm & blues" to emphasize his musical roots. Domino felt he was carrying on a tradition rather than breaking away from it, and consequently his music displayed none of the rebellious energy that sparked the rockabilly wildmen and his own polar opposite, Little Richard. Indeed, the graceful dignity and easygoing manner of his music is one of its great charms.

Fats displayed that same charm and grace as a performer and personality. He seemed like a rhythm & blues Santa Claus—jolly and kindly, without a hint of sex or rebelliousness. In other words, he seemed *safe*: he never set his pianos on fire or caused any scandals, there were no "hidden meanings" lurking behind his songs, and he didn't appear eager to lead your sons and daughters down the road to juvenile delinquency. His unthreatening image helped him avoid much of the parental suspicion and outrage that accompanied the advent of rock & roll. More importantly, it helped him overcome the racial biases and fears that kept many black performers of the fifties off the charts and in the shadows. Domino's low-key personality and image kept the focus of his appeal where it belonged—on his unique and immensely pleasurable music. Of rock's initial wave of solo performers, only Chuck Berry and Little Richard were similarly able to transcend racial prejudices and reach anything close to the wide audience they deserved: Berry by becoming the Eternal Teenager, Little Richard by being such a clownish lunatic that race became a secondary issue. Mild-mannered Fats outdid them both and ranked behind only Elvis and Pat Boone in terms of consistent sales in the 1950's.

"The Fat Man"

Antoine Domino was one of nine children, the only one to inherit his jazz violinist father's musical ambitions. A school dropout at 14, Fats nearly lost those dreams and several fingers in a factory accident, and only reclaimed them after a long and painful struggle to regain his mobility. (He never did achieve the facility of the great boogie and barrelhouse players, and stuck instead to a constant-chording style.) Domino established himself in the local clubs like the Hideaway, where he was discovered in 1949 by Dave Bartholomew and Imperial Records president Lew Chudd. Bartholomew: "We went down and Fats was singing a song the prisoners used to sing, 'Junkers Blues,' you know, a song about the junkie. In December 1949 most people didn't know what that word meant. We went down and we heard Fats and we really liked it. So I told Fats would he like to record and introduced him to Lew and we went on from there."[i]

"Junkers Blues" was rewritten as a theme song for Fats and recorded at the end of 1949. "The Fat Man" hit the national R&B Top Ten in 1950, beginning a long association between Domino and Dave Bartholomew, his co-writer, arranger and alter-ego. "The Fat Man" was recorded in Cosimo Matassa's studio with Bartholomew's stellar band, highlighted by Herb Hardesty and Alvin "Red" Tyler on riffing saxophones, and drummer Earl Palmer's aggressive swing. The focus of the record is Fats himself,

wailing away in a surprisingly high and gritty voice and pounding out a mistakenly over-recorded piano part. (Bartholomew liked the resulting up-front sound of the piano and used the unbalanced mix for the record, which in turn became a model for subsequent sessions. Fats also employed a vocal gimmick on the record—an odd, trumpet-like falsetto "wah-wah" sound that he abandoned on his later recordings.)

Domino hit #1 on the R&B charts in 1952 with "Goin' Home," and scored several more R&B hits through the early fifties—including 1953's "Please Don't Leave Me," later covered by the Johnny Burnette Trio—as he honed his uptempo style. A bluesy slow number from 1950 called "Every Night About This Time" introduced the other, slower side of Fats' style and the steady piano triplets that would accompany his pop hits (and nearly every fifties rock ballad).[ii] His other "trademark," his peculiar but endearing French Creole accent, came more to the fore as he began to sing in lower registers and as his overall style became smoother, calmer, less bluesy and more in keeping with Fats' even temperament. Fats was settling into a groove, fine-tuning a melodic style that turned out to be perfect for the rock market.

"Ain't That a Shame"

Domino finally broke the pop barrier in 1955 with "Ain't That a Shame," which contains all the classic Fats Domino elements.[iii] A modified 12-bar blues, written by Domino and Bartholomew, "Ain't That a Shame" is a rollicking good-times number despite its broken-hearted lyrics. As always, Fats refuses to take himself or his problems too seriously: the "ain't that a shame" refrain sounds more like a shrug than a sigh. With its easy-rhyming lyrics, instantly memorable tune and strong, midtempo dance beat, "Ain't That a Shame" was a natural crossover hit.

"Ain't That a Shame" is firmly rooted in New Orleans R&B tradition: the propelling bass riffs, rhythmic variety and unlabored tightness of the ensemble playing give the record a sound that simply couldn't have come from anywhere else. The song opens with a stop/start call-and-response between Fats and the band, then glides into the refrain, where the beat straightens out and the band divides into a multi-layered accompaniment: Fats plays straight chorded triplets on the piano, the guitar and bass double on a gentle boogie-bass riff, the saxes smooth out the texture with long held notes, and Earl Palmer gels it all with a swinging shuffle on his cymbals, booming downbeats on his bass drum and crisp backbeats on his snare. The syncopated verses and full-band refrains alternate throughout the song, embellished by a sax solo that gives the band and the song a chance to stretch out. Thanks to Bartholomew's arranging skills and the band member's natural rapport, the dense accompaniment sounds as loose and lively as a New Orleans parade band.

The repeating bass riff in "Ain't That a Shame," a descendent of Professor Longhair's boogie-rhumba, was one of Dave Bartholomew's musical signatures and is a key feature of most of Domino's songs. The solos on Fats' records were always taken by a saxophone, usually played by Herb Hardesty, that mirrored Fats' voice with a languid melodic style (which became an appropriately frenzied squall when backing Little Richard). Special note should be made of Earl Palmer, rock's first great drummer and the man responsible for the rhythmic push-and-pull that makes "Ain't That a Shame" and other early New Orleans hits so exciting. His snare cracks and parade beat bass drum anchor the song while his drum fills and playful offbeat kicks drive it forward and bridge

the different sections. (The equally able Charles "Hungry" Williams took over the bulk of the drumming in Matassa's studio in 1957 when Palmer moved on to California and great acclaim as a session drummer for Phil Spector, Ricky Nelson, the Beach Boys and many others.)

"Ain't That a Shame" went to #1 on the R&B charts and reached #10 on the pop charts in the summer of 1955. Released at the peak of the cover song era, "Ain't That a Shame" was quickly covered by Pat Boone, who took his pallid version to #1 on the pop charts. Fats' next big hit, 1956's "I'm In Love Again," outsold the Fontane Sisters' cover version, however, and no one tried to steal his version of "Blueberry Hill," which was also released in 1956—the biggest hit of his career.

Fats Domino, Rock & Roll Star

Released in 1956, "**Blueberry Hill**" was a time-honored standard (Louis Armstrong's 1949 version probably inspired Fats to do the song), as was "My Blue Heaven," a hit for Fats the same year. Although Fats and Bartholomew generally wrote his material, Fats' easygoing style lent itself well to popular standards and made them sound wholly original. Although his version of "Blueberry Hill" was supremely tasteful, some older critics feigned outrage at the rock "perversion" of "their" song, and even Dave Bartholomew had serious doubts about the wisdom of recording it: "It had been done a million times before and I wasn't too interested in Fats doing it. But he insisted he wanted to do 'Blueberry Hill...' Lew Chudd asked me what did I think and I said it was horrible, pull it off the streets fast, you're gonna ruin Fats. He said, 'What do you mean, we just sold two million records,' and that was in two weeks."[iv]

"Blueberry Hill" opens with one of rock's classic intros—a triadic piano figure that ushers in Fats' wistful remembrance of that night on Blueberry Hill when the moon stood still and "you were my thrill." *Something* certainly happened up there, but the amiable Fats disarms the sexual overtones that other rockers might have exaggerated, just as his delight in the memory of the night overcomes the fact that the girl's gone and all of her promises "were never to be." The band arrangement of "Blueberry Hill" is similar to that of "Ain't That a Shame," though slower and calmer. The verses are shaped by a graceful boogie riff in the guitar and bass and by Earl Palmer's snare backbeat. Palmer's cymbals double Fats' piano triplets, giving the relatively slow "rock-a-ballad" a constant inner pulse. The saxophones play long held notes through the verses to create a smooth background texture, then supply a lilting countermelody to Fats' vocals in the bridge section ("the wind in the willows..."); as the saxophones come to the fore, the guitar/bass riff drops out, giving the bridge section a contrasting dreamy feel—suspended between the verses as that night is suspended in time.

"**Blue Monday**," a 1957 hit written by Domino and Bartholomew, is a further example of the rhythmic dynamics and subtleties that were second-nature to the New Orleans bands. Here, instead of being a calm hiatus, the bridge section ("Saturday morning...") heightens the tension as the full band piles onto Fat's triplet piano rhythm before fanning back out for the return of the verse/refrain ("Sunday morning..."). The beat itself never changes, but the *articulation* of the beat—the way it is played and felt—changes dramatically, from a multi-layered arrangement to a pounding unison crescendo

and back again. And as always, the Fats' voice rides above the hard-driving arrangement as if it took no special effort at all.

For the most part, Fats' style varied little from one record to the next, though there was a gradual softening of his sound. Mindful of the fact that his primary audience was now teenagers, the themes of his songs grew younger, the tunes and lyrics grew simpler and the arrangements were embellished in an attempt to change with the times. "I'm Walkin'," "Whole Lotta Loving," "I'm Ready" and other late-fifties hits were sped up to rock & roll dance speed, the size of his backing band grew larger ("Be My Guest" has an almost Big Band swing sound), sweet choirs were occasionally added, as in "Valley of Tears," and some of his more lightweight numbers, such as "The Rooster Song" and "I'm Gonna Be a Wheel Someday," had novelty-style productions that fit their nursery rhyme lyrics.

Walking to New Orleans

Fats' steady stream of releases sold well and kept him in constant demand for television, movie and live appearances. His innocent songs and uncontroversial image also helped make him one of the few rock "founding fathers" to escape the fifties unscathed, though 1960's "Walking to New Orleans" was his last Top Ten hit, an appropriately melancholy good-bye wave. His records continued selling at a steady, if diminished, rate until 1963, when he left Imperial for ABC Records. His new label tried unsuccessfully to repeat the pop success they'd had with Ray Charles by burying Fats under glossy, middle-of-the-road material and "Modern Nashville" productions. Domino left ABC in 1965 for even deeper obscurity at Mercury Records, then ended up the decade on the Reprise label, where he had a minor hit with a cover of the Beatles' "Lady Madonna" (a song directly inspired by Domino's New Orleans style).

Although his recording career never recovered, Domino has remained a popular live performer on the "oldies shows" and the Las Vegas nightclub circuit. Fats continues to work comfortably within a tradition—including, now, his own, and he has weathered the decline of his career as gracefully as he handled his sudden leap to stardom. Fats was a calm in the center of the storm—his mere presence lent a certain dignity to rock & roll, and the ever-present smile on his face made it seem that his life was as easy and happy as the songs he sang. Pushing seventy, he sings his old songs, as always, without a hint of strain. His voice and charm remain perfectly intact and his classic hits remain true classics.

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[i]Broven, "Walking to New Orleans," p. 30.
[ii] The piano triplets were probably inspired by Little Willie Littlefield's 1948 hit "It's Midnight."
[iii]The title was originally "Ain't It a Shame," though he sings "that."
[iv]Broven, p. 67.

LITTLE RICHARD

It's hard to imagine what rock & roll would have been like without Little Richard, the living embodiment of rock's raucous soul. His maniacal passion and outrageous image presented the *other* extreme from the polite crooning of Pat Boone (who, nevertheless, covered a couple of Little Richard's songs to truly comic effect). In two short years he wrote some of rock's landmark songs and ripped through the remaining boundaries of "good taste" to show what rock & roll could be if you dared to take it all the way. From the opening "WopBopaLooma-beLopBomBom" of "Tutti Frutti" straight through every note he sang, Little Richard fulfilled rock's promise of liberation through sheer energy and audacity. If rock & roll was indeed "nothing but a bunch of noise," as its many critics claimed, then Little Richard showed just how joyous that noise could be.

Little Richard shared many musical traits with Fats Domino: both played piano and wrote their own beatifically childlike songs, both were backed by bass-driven and sax & piano-dominated band arrangements, both hit the pop charts in 1955, and both shared Matassa's recording studio and Studio Band, though the friendly confines became something of a padded cell during Richard's sessions. For all the similarities, Little Richard and Fats Domino were musical and temperamental opposites: where Fats was calm, refined and unassuming, Little Richard was crude, high-strung and outrageous; and where Fats never seemed to strain, Little Richard seemed to do little else. His music had none of the polish and melodicism of Fats' style, and none of its easygoing charm. In fact, Little Richard seemed always on the verge of spinning out of control—just barely able to rein in his energy—and it is that feeling of controlled chaos that made his music so exciting.

Little Richard really had more in common with Jerry Lee Lewis, the other piano wildman, than with studio mate Domino. His music is the R&B equivalent of Lewis' rockabilly: a stripped-down and manic extension of rhythm & blues that shredded R&B conventions just as Lewis bulldozed over his country roots. In addition, the two kindred spirits were both racked by religious crises and inner demons that seemed to fuel the too-late-to-stop-now intensity of their music and the transcendent madness of their live performances. Being black and gay (though that wasn't directly articulated at the time), Little Richard had two big additional strikes against him in the conservative world of Eisenhower America. But everybody loves a clown, as they say, and he demanded and got attention by exaggerating his genuine oddness to the point that the kids cheered and the adults simply stared in disbelief. His mega-watt voice, outrageous image and antics, piled-high pompadour and liberal use of lipstick, mascara and other makeup(!) created a truly bizarre and unforgettable sight—a "Bronze Liberace," as Richard liked to call himself, before he took to introducing himself as "the King of Rock & Roll... and the Queen too!"

Another favorite moniker, the "Quasar of Rock & Roll," seems particularly apt in light of the dictionary definition of quasar: "one of a number of celestial objects... that are powerful sources of radio energy."[1] From the moment the first horrified parent heard "Tutti Frutti" blasting over the airwaves in 1955, Little Richard was rock's greatest source of radio energy. He seemed to suddenly appear from the outer galaxies with a strange new message ("WopBopaLooma!?") and a crazed, alien voice shouting—in coded messages only teenagers could understand—that the Invasion had begun. And it wasn't merely another case of white ears reacting to an R&B crossover: a good many R&B fans

were as surprised as the pop listeners by the ferocity of the onslaught, which owed more to deep southern gospel styles than to the comparatively polished singing styles of R&B. In fact, "Tutti Frutti" must have surprised even Little Richard: "I came from a family where my people didn't like rhythm & blues. Bing Crosby—'Pennies from Heaven'—and Ella Fitzgerald was all I heard. And I knew there was something *louder* than that, but I didn't know where to find it. And I found out it was me."[ii]

Background: **Macon to New Orleans**

Richard Penniman was born on December 5, 1932, in Macon, Georgia, which was also home to James Brown, Otis Redding and, later, the Allman Brothers. He was one of twelve children in a devout Seventh Day Adventist family (though his father did embellish his religious beliefs by selling bootleg whiskey). Richard's earliest musical experiences were in the church, and his gospel roots are clearly evident in his singing. The harsh, frenzied vocal styles of many of the black gospel groups of the forties and fifties are the nearest equivalent to Richard's screaming delivery—much closer than any pop or R&B model. (Richard has often said that his trademark shrieking "woo" came directly from gospel giant Marion Williams, while his shrieking hiccups—like those that punctuate "Lucille"—were inspired by Ruth Brown's "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean.")

Richard was a misfit from the start, and his wild streak, his love for the forbidden blues and his early awareness of his homosexuality kept him at odds with his family. He ran away from home to join a traveling "medicine show," then took to singing on the streets of Macon and finally, at 13, was kicked out of the house. He was taken in by a white couple who encouraged his music and often gave him the stage at the local nightclub they ran. In 1951, Penniman, now "Little Richard," sang in a talent contest sponsored by a radio station and won a recording contract with RCA Records.

Little Richard's RCA releases, recorded in Atlanta, showed few signs of things to come. The standard jump-blues material was sung in a restrained style heavily influenced by Roy Brown and Wynonie Harris. (Richard's own "Every Hour" is the most widely available song from this period, and is hardly recognizable as Little Richard.) He left RCA in 1952 for the Houston-based Peacock label, where his recordings proved a bit more exciting but still fairly run-of-the-mill. He had already developed a flamboyant stage routine, but his recorded music captured little of his personal extravagance and his records failed to sell. By 1955, Richard was back in Macon washing dishes at the Greyhound station and still dreaming of his big break, which finally came in a call to audition for Art Rupe's Specialty Records in Los Angeles.

"Tutti Frutti"

After Specialty's success with Guitar Slim and Lloyd Price, Rupe was anxious to do more recording in Cosimo Matassa's studio, and particularly anxious for the type of pop success recently enjoyed by Fats Domino on Imperial Records. Specialty A&R man **Bumps Blackwell** was signed on as Richard's manager and producer and plans were made for a recording session in New Orleans. Thus Little Richard, from Georgia, became linked with New Orleans through a record label based in Los Angeles. The connection was tenuous but all-important, for in New Orleans Little Richard would

finally find the sound and let loose the voice that had eluded him for four years at RCA and Peacock.

It still took an inspired accident to create Little Richard's first hit. His initial Specialty session, on September 14, 1955, was largely taken up with mediocre R&B recordings similar to his RCA and Peacock material. Blackwell deemed the proceedings so unpromising that an early halt was called to the session so that everyone could retire for afternoon drinks at the Dew Drop Inn. While Blackwell nursed his disappointment at the bar, Richard—visions of dirty dishes at the Greyhound station filling his mind—headed for the piano to vent his frustrations and screamed out some rhyming obscenities in a rowdy voice unlike anything he'd hinted at in the studio. Like Sam Phillips hearing Elvis stumble onto his true voice with "That's All Right," a startled Bumps Blackwell knew he'd just heard the real Little Richard. A local songwriter, Dorothy La Bostrie, was quickly called in to clean up the words, which an embarrassed Little Richard at first refused to sing "in front of a lady. " (He was finally coaxed into blurting them out while facing a wall.) With fifteen minutes of studio time remaining, "Tutti Frutti" was recorded and the blueprint was laid for all the Little Richard hits to come.

The rapid-fire pace and last minute recording of "Tutti Frutti" left little room for subtleties, but the record still captures the freewheeling New Orleans rhythmic drive. The record is propelled by Richard's piano and Earl Palmer's drums, which manage to swing even at ninety miles an hour, and is punctuated by sudden stops & starts and by brief saxophone answers to Richard's voice. As with most of his songs, "Tutti Frutti" is built over a 12-bar blues and features a saxophone as the solo instrument in the lead break. Lee Allen and Red Tyler played most of the solos on Richard's records, in styles far more gritty and clamorous than their work with Fats Domino and other artists. Just as Little Richard was inspired by his excellent sessionmen, they in turn responded to Richard's frenzied style by reaching outrageous heights of their own.

All of this is secondary, though, to the VOICE: a vocal fuzz box punctuated by trademark shrieks and falsetto "whooo's" that shredded microphones and any remnants of a discernible tune. Although the words were sanitized for popular consumption, "Tutti Frutti" still sounds gleefully obscene, with orgasmic whoops giving explicit meaning to the otherwise nonsensical title refrain and "wopbopalooma's." While parents bemoaned the final collapse of decency and good taste, kids bought the record in droves and sent it up to #17 on the pop charts (and #2 on the R&B charts). Although the full impact of "Tutti Frutti" was blunted somewhat by Pat Boone's tepid cover version, the success of Little Richard, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and other black artists helped break through the racial and musical barriers that separated audiences and provided a rationale for covers. As the consciousness of the record buying public was raised, more rock fans and radio listeners began demanding the genuine article. Richard's next release, 1956's "Long Tall Sally," hit the pop Top Ten and outsold Pat Boone's cover, marking the symbolic end of the era of the cover songs.

The Specialty Years

Little Richard begins "**Long Tall Sally**" by threatening to tell Aunt Mary about straying Uncle John ("he claimed he has the misery but he havin' lotta fun") and the time he's been having with Long Tall Sally ("she's built for speed—she got everything that Uncle John need"). Before long, however, he seems to have forgotten about all of them:

"I'm havin' me some fun tonight!" is the real message of the song, and by the end of the two minute cataclysm there's little doubt about it—Little Richard's having more fun than Pat Boone could imagine in his wildest dreams.

The stop-and-go band arrangement of "Long Tall Sally" mirrors "Tutti Frutti" and keeps the band thrusting forward in its race to keep up with Little Richard. All of Richard's vocal trademarks are present in abundance as well: he works falsetto "whooo's" into every refrain, announces the sax solo with a great lead-in scream and then, at its end, launches into another verse with a measure-long, glass shattering "weeeelll..." Moments like these and the sheer *sound* of his shredding vocal cords are the real "meaning" of Little Richard's songs. The words themselves don't seem to matter and tend to be oversexed utter nonsense, when they're intelligible at all, and little more than vehicles for his incredible voice.

For that matter, his *songs* seem little more than vehicles for his voice and magnificent presence. In isolation, songs like "Tutti Frutti," "Heeby-Jeebies," "Ready Teddy" and "Jenny Jenny" are a blissful noise that make about as much sense as their titles. Considered together, every crazed installment illuminates another tiny corner of the Richard's self-absorbed world. His songs and the characters that populate them—Daisy, Sue, Sally, Jenny, Lucille, Miss Ann, Miss Molly and all the other objects of his delight—seem like interchangeable parts of one long vision and one long, joyous shriek. As Arnold Shaw put it, "Little Richard represents a triumph of style over substance."[iii] More than with any other artist, when you listen to Little Richard you don't hear "songs," you hear *him*. He is the crowing glory of rock & roll's subversion of pop, of the ascendance of the Singer over the Song. He never expounded much on "wopbopalooma," and never needed to: HE was the meaning of every word he sang.

It's hard and rather pointless, then, to single out individual Little Richard recordings, since they are all classics and all so similar to each other. "**Keep A-Knockin'**" merits special notice, as it was recorded in a Washington, D.C. radio station during a tour break and features his touring band, The Upsetters, instead of the New Orleans sessionmen. The furious sound of "Keep A-Knockin'" stands out even in Richard's catalog, and is a good indication of what his tumultuous live shows must have been like. "**Lucille**," on the other hand, stands out for the elegance of its arrangement, shaped by an understated guitar/bass/sax riff, alternating with short stop-start verses and a great, growling sax solo. The piano and drums play the constant duple rhythm (1-2, 1-2) that gives Richard's songs a more assertive drive than the smooth triplets that articulated Fats Domino's slower tempos.

"**Good Golly Miss Molly**" ("you sure like to ball!") is Little Richard's finest moment. It is highlighted by voice-and-drum breaks and dramatic band pauses that keep the song fresh and exciting. The arrangement is driven by an aggressive guitar, bass & sax riff borrowed from "Rocket 88," and by some particularly inspired drumming, piano playing and breathless singing. "Heeby-Jeebies" takes the stop-start arrangements to a hilarious extreme, like a carrousel lurching out of control, while "The Girl Can't Help It," the title song of the 1956 movie, is one of Richard's more involved productions, with responding background vocals and a swinging sax section.

"Rip It Up" and "Ready Teddy" have a cut loose rockabilly feel that inspired Elvis, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Eddie Cochran, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley and many others to record their own versions. The raw energy of Little Richard's songs

transcended any particular style and made them favorites of his fellow rockers who, Pat Boone aside, were challenged and inspired to match his exuberance with their own. When "Tutti Frutti" hit, rock & roll was brand new and just starting to build a "tradition" of its own. Along with Chuck Berry, Little Richard gave rock & roll a repertoire of its own that defined it as more than a borrowing or retooling of older styles. Although Berry would outstrip Little Richard in the following decade as rock's most covered songwriter, in the 1950's Richard had that honor all to himself.

"0oh! My Soul"

At the height of his career, Little Richard suddenly announced that he was giving up show business to devote his life to God, or as he put it, "giving up rock & roll for the Rock of Ages." Richard's innate religious qualms about playing the Devil's music were rekindled by a fellow Specialty artist determined to convert him, and they flared into a spiritual identity crisis during a 1957 tour of Australia. Apparently, according to one of the many explanations for his change of heart, a plane that he was flying on between shows caught fire, prompting Richard (understandably!) to promise God he'd give up rock & roll if only He'd make the plane land safely. His decision was reinforced during an outdoor concert when Richard witnessed the ascent of the Russian Sputnik, the first satellite launched into space: "That night Russia sent off that very first Sputnik. It looked as though the big ball of fire came directly over the stadium about two or three hundred feet above our heads. It shook my mind. It really shook my mind. I got up from the piano and said, 'This is it. I am through. I am leaving show business to go back to God.'"[iv]

Little Richard held a press conference the next day to officially announce his decision and then, in a characteristically dramatic gesture, dumped $20,000 worth of jewelry into Sydney Harbor to prove his sincerity. It was widely viewed as a publicity stunt, but he meant it: he turned his back on his fame and riches, enrolled in the Oakwood Bible College in Huntsville, Alabama, and vanished from the music scene for the next six years. (Specialty kept Little Richard on the charts as long as they could by releasing the remaining songs from their vaults: "Keep A-Knockin'," "Good Golly Miss Molly" and his last hit, "Ooh! My Soul," appropriately enough, were all released after Richard's conversion.)

Little Richard finally agreed to perform again on a 1962-63 package tour of Europe and England, providing he sang only gospel numbers. His religious songs received an understandably lukewarm audience response, and before long his pride and fiery competitiveness overcame his convictions. Watching the other acts steal the shows was simply more than Richard could stand, and he finally raged back with "Tutti Frutti" and the rest of his magnificent catalog of classics, fueled to new heights of lunacy by the years of pent-up silence. Nik Cohn describes Richard's plunge back into the Dark Side: "The first time I saw him was in 1963, sharing a bill with the Rolling Stones, Bo Diddley and the Everly Brothers, and he cut them all to shreds. He didn't look sane. He screamed and his eyes bulged; the veins jutted out of his skull. He came down front and stripped—his jacket, tie, cuff links, his golden shirt, his huge diamond watch—right down to flesh. Then he hid inside a silk dressing gown, and all the time he roared and everyone jumped around in the aisles like it was the beginning of rock all over again... When it was through, he smiled sweetly. 'That Little Richard,' he said. 'Such a nice boy.'"[v]

With the Rolling Stones paying him homage, the Beatles covering "Long Tall Sally" and Paul McCartney borrowing his "oooh's" and shrieks every chance he got, Little Richard decided it was time for a full-scale comeback.[vi] Richard recorded "Bama Lama, Bama Loo," his last Specialty release, in classic, raving Little Richard style—a little *too* classic, unfortunately. In 1964, the year of the British Invasion, it simply sounded like an oldie and failed to make the charts. Although his live shows remained exciting, Richard never regained an audience for his recordings. He went through a series of record labels, alternating between ill-conceived new material and uninspired re-recordings of his old hits. The maniacal commitment to a single, self-defining style that made his early music so exciting also left little room for artistic growth. An early seventies stint with Reprise Records yielded some good new material, particularly the album called *The Rill Thing*, but it was still a far cry from the his glory days and the sales were poor.

As his frustration mounted Richard's personality became increasingly bizarre and his live shows lapsed into self-parody. Always something of a rock & roll Muhammad Ali, he had, in his prime, achieved an effective balance between his outrageous behavior and his music. Now, with no new music to bolster his claims to greatness, he generally made a clown of himself onstage and on the TV talk shows he seemed to appear on with alarming regularity.

Little Richard fluctuated between rock and God through the seventies and into the eighties, when the release of his autobiography prompted a return to the talk show circuit and a flurry of movie and media appearances. Today a somewhat calmer Little Richard speaks openly about his crises of religion and sexuality and about his former problems with drugs and money (like far too many of rock's early stars, Richard received only a fraction of the amount due him). He also speaks with justifiable pride about his enormous contribution to rock & roll and his vast influence on so many that have followed him. Besides "teaching Paul McCartney how to sing," Richard directly inspired and helped launch the careers of James Brown, Otis Redding, Billy Preston and Jimi Hendrix, who played guitar in one of Richard's comeback bands (and was later quoted as saying "I want to do with my guitar what Little Richard does with his voice"[vii]). Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Travelin' Band" was clearly a tribute to one of their formative influences, and the list of singers influenced by Little Richard, from Elvis through Mitch Rider and Bob Seger all the way to Prince, would be endless, and would ultimately have to include everyone who's ever gotten crazy and wailed rock & roll. Still, there's only one "rill thing." Little Richard was an original's original and, for sheer energy and excitement, the inspired madness of his rock & roll has never been topped.

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[i]The Random House College Dictionary.
[ii]Shaw, "Honkers and Shouters," p. 191.
[iii]Shaw, p. 190.
[iv]Charles White, "The Life and Times of Little Richard," (New York: Harmony, 1984).
[v]Nik Cohn, "Rock from the Beginning," (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), p. 33.
[vi]The Beatles hooked up twice with their hero and mentor during his European tour: at the Star Club in Hamburg , Germany, and back home in Liverpool at a concert organized by Brian Epstein.
[vii]White, "The Life and Times of Little Richard."

NEW ORLEANS IN THE SOUL ERA

New Orleans music adapted to the softening pop sounds of the early sixties with lighter beats and an emphasis on catchy hooks and novelty-styled tunes. Although softened, the music was still full of lively rhythms and ensemble work and still retained a distinctly "New Orleans" sound. In fact, the Twist and the other dance crazes that swept the country in the early sixties inspired something of an R&B revival that was right up New Orleans' alley. Huey Smith's "Pop-Eye" and Chris Kenner's "Land of 1,000 Dances" are notable New Orleans dance tunes of the era, and the Twist King himself, Philadelphian Chubby Checker, owed much—including his nickname—to Fats Domino and the New Orleans sound.

The long-overdue establishment of local record labels kept Cosimo Matassa's studio in high gear after the involvement of the outside labels began to wane at the end of the fifties. Minit, Rex, Ric, Ron, Rip, Instant, Fire, Fury, Red Bird, Watch, Dover and many other small labels came and went in the late fifties and through the sixties. Although none achieved the consistency of Chicago's Chess or Detroit's Motown labels, they provided a crucial outlet for local artists.

Minit Records, founded in 1959, pioneered the new styles, followed quickly by Instant and a rash of other labels that seemed to spring up daily. The recording was still centered around Cosimo Matassa's studio, now home to a younger group of sessionmen led by pianist/writer/arranger **Allen Toussaint**, who inherited Bartholomew's influential role. Most of New Orleans' early 1960's hits came from veteran local performers who managed to come up with a one-shot fling at the national pop charts. Toussaint and Minit Records had their first hit with Jessie Hill's "Ooh Poo Pah Doo" in 1960. Other standout Touissaint productions included Ernie K-Doe's "Mother-in-Law," Benny Spellman's "Fortune Teller," the Showmen's rock tribute "It Will Stand," Barbara George's "I Know," Aaron Neville's "Over You," Art Neville's "All These Things" and Chris Kenner's "I Like It Like That." The few New Orleans hits from the period that were not produced by Toussaint include Lee Dorsey's "Ya Ya" and "Do-Re-Mi," Joe Jones' "You Talk Too Much," Barbara Lynn's "You'll Lose a Good Thing," and the Dixie Cups' "Chapel of Love," and guitarist Earl King's "Trick Bag" and "Come On" (later covered by Jimi Hendrix).

The arrival of the Beatles brought most New Orleans operations to a halt, and the city's music was slow to mirror black music's transition from R&B to soul music. New Orleans regained some of its stride in the mid-sixties: New Orleans native Irma Thomas made a handful of great soul records for Imperial in 1964, including "I Wish Someone Would Care" and the gospel-style "Time Is On My Side," quickly reworked by the Rolling Stones; Robert Parker's 1966 hit "Barefootin'" is a dance-soul classic, and Aaron Neville hit again that same year with the soul ballad "Tell It Like It Is." The major New Orleans soul star turned out to be "Mr. Ya Ya" **Lee Dorsey**, who hooked up with Allen Toussaint in 1965 and crafted a contemporary, funk-soul dance style. Dorsey's mid-to-late sixties hits included "Ride Your Pony," "Working In the Coal Mine," "Holy Cow," "Riverboat" and "Get Out of My Life, Woman." An ill-conceived switch to topical "message" songs and the changing audience tastes of the early seventies brought Dorsey's career to a halt. He died in 1987 after a decade of local appearances and unsuccessful comeback attempts.

Toussaint remained active as a producer, arranger and much-covered songwriter, expanding beyond his New Orleans base to work with The Band, John Mayall, Joe Cocker and many other artists. Although New Orleans' heyday was well-past by the end of the 1960's, the spirit of its music has been kept alive by "**Dr. John**" (Mac Rebennack), a piano playing veteran of New Orleans' glory days who recorded a tribute to his city's music called *Gumbo* in 1972 and had a pop hit in 1973 with "Right Place, Wrong Time." The city's musical traditions have also been sustained by the durable backup group the Meters, by "black Indian" Mardi Gras groups like the Wild Tchoupitoulas and the Wild Magnolias, by the resurgent popularity of brass band, Cajun and zydeco styles, and by the continuing appeal of the timeless **Neville Brothers**, the most visible ambassadors of the city's music, whose members have had hits that span three decades of New Orleans styles.

Although its artists rarely make the charts or break new ground, the sound of New Orleans lives on night after night in the city's clubs and festivals. Music still plays a large role in the daily life of the city, and the big beat and happy sound of New Orleans carries on like a living monument to the musical contributions of that unique city. New Orleans record man Marshall Sehorn summed up the spirit of the city this way: "You can go anywhere you want to, there's no music like New Orleans music... Nobody else has as good a time as we do, nobody else shakes their ass as much as we do, and that's everybody, everybody from young to old, black and white, Indians, jumpin', dancin', carryin' on and having a good time. And that's what it's all about, that's what this city is all about."[i]

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[i]Broven, "Walking to New Orleans," p. 217.