

## 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.