

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."ⁱⁱⁱ

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.

ⁱIt 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!)

ⁱⁱPaul Burlison quote from 1983 *Musician* magazine.