

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 Lee 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.