

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.

ⁱGreil Marcus, "Mystery Train," rev. ed. (1976; New York: Dutton, 1982), p. 181.

ⁱⁱGuralnick, *Sun Sessions* liner notes.

ⁱⁱⁱThough 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.