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.

---

[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.