"**Honey Don't**," released on the flipside of "Blue Suede Shoes," is a self-mocking plea to a straying woman ("You've been out a-paintin' the town, uh-huh baby been slippin' around...") goaded along by a loping boogie riff and a strong accent on the offbeat. Like "Blue Suede Shoes," "Honey Don't" is full of the clever rhymes and wordplays, down-home humor, hillbilly imagery, hepcat slang and excited interjections ("bop bop!," "rock!," "go cat!") that characterize most of Perkin's songs, along with Sun Records' musical trademarks: slapping bass, slapback echo, the percussive acoustic guitar, lean production, etc. Both songs are based on a 12-bar blues and feature a halting stop-start verse rhythm balanced by a more propulsive feeling in the choruses and lead breaks. The whole is shaped by Perkins' distinctive guitar playing—a blend of blues and boogie runs and jangling country licks, delivered with a mix of flat picking (using a guitar pick on the chords and on the low-string boogie riffs, such as those accompanying the "Honey Don't" refrain) and finger-picking (on the high-string leads and on the "fills" between sung lines, as in the "Blue Suede Shoes" chorus). "My guitar style is nothin' in the world but black blues speeded up. If you slowed down the guitar break on "Blue Suede Shoes" or any of my Sun records, it wouldn't be a thing but black blues."[i] Perkins' guitar playing was supremely tasteful and musical, the purest definition of rockabilly guitar playing for those who followed. (George Harrison, for one, idolized Perkins and nailed his style perfectly on "Honey Don't," "Matchbox" and "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby," the three Perkins songs covered by the Beatles .)

For all the similarities and style traits shared by Perkins and Elvis, their music and personalities were very different. Shy, retiring Perkins, with a wife and kids at home, had little of Elvis' charismatic sensuality and burning ambition, and always seemed more comfortable with a country lifestyle than with the trappings of stardom. (It's hard to imagine Carl Perkins in Hollywood!) Similarly, his recordings lack the unrestrained abandon and overt passion of Presley's and seem, instead, more like a natural extension of his hillbilly roots than a rebellious break with tradition. Elvis' move to RCA clarified the distinction between rockabilly and rock & roll: his rendition of "Blue Suede Shoes" is propelled by a huge drum beat, full band sound, streamlined dance rhythm and polished production that makes it very different from Perkins' countrified original. With its barndance beats and twangy vocals and guitar, Perkins' music could never leave its southern accents far enough behind to pass for mainstream rock & roll.

Dixie Fried

Carl Perkins wrote his own songs, unlike Elvis and most of the other white rockers of the fifties (only Buddy Holly showed the same talent for writing), and he always stayed true to his pristine rockabilly style, unwilling or unable to bend and adapt to changing trends and styles. His music seemed to spring directly from his life and the honky-tonk world he knew best, and it always served as a reminder of the "hillbilly" roots of "rockabilly." Indeed, many of Perkins' greatest songs are anthems to the South and the freewheeling side of its culture. In "Boppin' the Blues," Perkins sings of the joys of country folk discovering the purifying powers of a big blues beat, while "**Dixie Fried**" spins a tale of a wild, brawling southern night, complete with flashing razors ("he jerked out a razor but he wasn't shavin!"), a police raid and a drunken hero behind bars still exhorting his pals to "rave on" and get "Dixie Fried." Perkin's dedication to his heritage

gave his music much of its charm and "authenticity," but it also limited its commercial appeal in a market that was being increasingly geared toward a younger teen and pre-teen national audience. Nonetheless, with the huge success of "Blue Suede Shoes," it seemed at first that Carl Perkins was destined to be a big star.

That dream ended abruptly in March 1956 when the band was traveling to New York for a string of major television appearances. A terrible car wreck badly injured Carl and his brother Jay (who died in 1958 from complications resulting from the crash). Instead of gaining invaluable media exposure for himself and his hit record, Carl was out of commission for nine months, watching from the sidelines as Elvis released his own version of "Blue Suede Shoes" and became more associated with the song than Perkins himself.[ii] Perkins was back in form and in the studio by the end of the year, but it was too late. He kept making great records, including "**Matchbox**" (a rockabilly reworking of an old Blind Lemon Jefferson blues, featuring Jerry Lee Lewis on piano), "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby," "Put Your Cat Clothes On" and "Glad All Over," but his moment had come and gone and the records were only regional hits.

The King of Rockabilly

Carl Perkins left Sun Records for Columbia in 1958, but the move to a major label failed to work the same type of magic that it had for Elvis. The late 1950's and the early 1960's "teen idol" era was a wasteland for Carl, who had to follow other "old-timers" to England and Europe to find the respect he deserved. Depressed by his dormant career, the death of his brother and other personal problems, Perkins drank heavily and self-destructed for many years.

Perkins joined old friend Johnny Cash's band in 1968 after the death Cash's guitarist, Luther Perkins (no relation), and spent several happy years with the Cash entourage. Perkins played on the famous prison shows that solidified Cash's "man in black" image and fame, and wrote a few hits for Cash, including "Daddy Sang Bass." He also quit drinking, got religion and straightened out his life, and completed his circle in the late seventies when he began touring on his own again with his sons, instead of his brothers, as his backup band.

The 1980's rockabilly revival brought a renewed appreciation of the King of Rockabilly. Ever humble and always grateful for his good fortune, Perkins seems genuinely touched by the admiration of his descendants and feels a bond with them that bridges the years. One crucial point separates them, however, as it separates all the "original masters" from their disciples—Perkins can remember a time *before* rock & roll: "[Rock & roll] came out of black spiritual music... We mixed that up with country music. But the new guys don't go that far back with the *music*. They go back with the *records*. We go from the record on down to the cotton patch where it came from. That's the difference."[iii]

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[i]Flanagan, "Written in My Soul," p. 15.

[ii] There were no hard feelings: Perkins liked his friend's version and was grateful that Elvis had held back its release until Perkin's original had run its chart course.

[iii]Flanagan, p. 22.