The Sun Years: 1954-55

Sun Records was a relatively small-time operation that had a huge impact on rock & roll. It's owner and operator, **Sam Phillips** (born 1923), is a legendary figure in his own right. With a roster of artists that included Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich and Roy Orbison, along with many of the great southern blues artists, Phillips' importance to the development of rock & roll cannot be overstated. Simply discovering those artists would have been enough to secure his place in history, but all of them went on to make some of the very best—if not *the* best—music of their careers with Phillips at the controls.

Phillips genuinely loved the music he recorded and believed in his artists, and they, in turn, believed in and respected him. He had a great knack for helping his artists discover their own unique style and hidden talents, and he fostered an air of casual camaraderie that helped make inspired "accidents" like "That's All Right" possible. As Carl Perkins later recalled, "You just forgot about making a record and tried to show him. I'd walk out on a limb, I'd try things I knew I couldn't do, and then have to work my way out of it. I'd say 'Mr. Phillips, that's terrible.' He'd say 'That's original.' I'd say, 'But it's just a big original mistake.' And he said, 'That's what Sun records *is*!'"[i]

Memphis was a hotbed of blues talent at the beginning of the 1950's, with a vibrant club scene on Beale Street, where Elvis soaked up the sights and sounds he would soon mimic, and a well-established presence of black radio station stations that kept blues, R&B and gospel sounds just a flick of the dial away from the *Grand Ole Opry* broadcasts. Sam Phillips opened the Memphis Recording Service in 1950 to provide an outlet for the city's great blues and R&B talent, and made some of the first recordings by B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Elmore James, Ike Turner, James Cotton, Junior Parker, Walter Horton and Rufus Thomas. After first leasing his recordings to outside labels (the classic "Rocket 88," for example, was issued by Chess Records), he began his own **Sun Records** label in 1952. Although he was painfully aware of the prejudice that limited its commercial potential, Phillips loved black music and realized that it had an intensity and vitality that was sorely lacking in the stagnant pop music of the time. Now if only he could find a white artist who could capture that same drive and spirit...

Meanwhile, to help finance his blues recordings, Phillips continued the Memphis Recording Service's other functions: mobile recordings and an in-studio, do-it-yourself operation that let anyone off the street come in, pay $4 and walk out with his own record. In the summer of 1953, Elvis walked in to do just that, after many long minutes of pacing the sidewalk in front of the studio to work up his nerves. After witnessing the spectacle, Sam's bemused office manager, Marion Keisker, took Elvis' payment and asked him who he sounded like and what type of song he wanted to record. The shy teenager politely—and prophetically—replied, "I don't sound like nobody," then recorded "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin" to his own guitar accompaniment.

Sam Phillips sensed something different about the nervous but sincere young singer—something promising enough to prompt him to make his own copy of the recordings for future reference. It certainly wasn't the magnetic charisma that Elvis would soon be known for, as Phillips later recalled: "Elvis Presley probably innately was the most introverted person that [ever] came into that studio. He didn't go to this little club and pick and grin. All he did was sit with his guitar on the side of the bed at home.

I don't think he even played on the front porch."[ii] Elvis was a fully-realized product of his own imagination: he never "jammed" with friends or sang with a band before coming to Sun, and he invented a look for himself that invited years of ridicule before becoming the Look of a generation. Like so many other lonely and alienated young people, Elvis created a fantasy world for himself and an idealized image of what he wanted to be. Unlike all others, he made that dream real, forcing the music to bend to his vision and creating a wholly original style in the process.

The Sun Recordings

Elvis was in the back of Sam's mind for nearly a year before he was finally called for a real audition. Phillips hooked him up with guitarist **Scotty More** and bassist **Bill Black**—the other heroes of the Sun Sessions—and began the search for the right song and the right style for the young truck driver. The search ended—and the future began—abruptly on July 5 when the little band launched into "That's All Right."

The group reconvened the next evening, July 6, and recorded again, now experimenting with and defining a style that hadn't existed—even in their wildest dreams—just 24 short hours earlier. After "That's All Right," Sam, Elvis, Scotty and Bill knew they were breaking new ground with every step, and the excitement and enthusiasm of Elvis' Sun recordings reflects that sense of discovery. Existing rehearsal tapes and outtakes show they were constantly experimenting with the tempo, style and feel of the songs, and mixing up old styles to create new possibilities. At the end of a slow, bluesy rehearsal of "**Blue Moon of Kentucky**," for example, Sam can be heard saying, "fine, man... hell, that's different, that's a pop song now!" A bluegrass classic by Bill Monroe, "Blue Moon of Kentucky" was chosen for the flipside of "That's All Right," though the fast, aggressive released version was completely different from the early rehearsals, reflecting the anything goes atmosphere at Sun, and establishing the pattern of blues-country pairings that was used for the remainder of Elvis' Sun singles.

Elvis never really wrote a song of his own, but at his best he reworked and revitalized the songs he sang so thoroughly that he might as well have written them. He ignored the lamenting overtones of Crudup's original "That's All Right," and turned Junior Parker's dirge-like "Mystery Train" into a celebration. (Parker mourns the fact that the train "took my baby, and it's gonna do it again," while Elvis' train "took my baby, but it NEVER WILL AGAIN.") In similar fashion, Roy Brown's classy jump-blues "Good Rockin' Tonight" became a battle cry for a new era, while Arthur Gunter's timid "Baby Let's Play House" was transformed into a musical and sexual cataclysm.

Elvis' "**Milkcow Blues Boogie**" is a combination of an old Kokomo Arnold blues standard and "Brain Cloudy Blues," a western swing number by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. Although loosely a blues "cover," his inspired vision of the song is as far from the blues as his "Blue Moon of Kentucky" was from bluegrass, though he begins "Milkcow Blues Boogie" with a playful false start of slow, straight blues. Elvis cuts the intriguing opening short with a challenge to the band: "Hold it fellas! That don't move me. Let's get real, real GONE for a change." He then plunges into the song for real, with a hopped-up tempo and an daredevil vocal performance that erases the false start from memory and mocks the notion that he, Elvis Presley, could ever be confined to old-time blues any more than he could confine himself to the staid bluegrass of Bill Monroe. "I don't sound like nobody," indeed. Elvis' Sun Sessions were a triumph of instinctive, self-

creating talent, and are pure rock & roll—the purest rock & roll, standing at the crossroads of the pre-rock past and the decades of music they helped spawn. Elvis reinvented himself in one blinding flash, and fused his influences so seamlessly that total effect of the Sun recordings is that of a slate wiped clean, where anything and everything was possible.

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[i]Peter Guralnick, liner notes for *Elvis: The Sun Sessions*, (RCA Compact Disc, 1987).
[ii]Guralnick, *Sun Sessions* liner notes.