

# THE BIRTH OF **ROCK'N ROLL**



PETER GURALNICK AND COLIN ESCOTT  
FOREWORD BY **JERRY LEE LEWIS**





# FOREWORD



Jerry Lee Lewis and Sam Phillips.

When I first heard about Sam Phillips and Sun Records, I knew if I could play for Sam he could make me a star; he was the man I needed to see to really get things going. He'd already made Elvis a hit, and if he could do it for Elvis he could certainly do it for Jerry Lee Lewis. My daddy sold thirty-three dozen eggs so he could drive me from Ferriday, Louisiana, to Memphis, Tennessee, just so I could audition for Sam. I was determined to get him to hear my music, but when we arrived he was out of town, so I auditioned for "Cowboy" Jack Clement. I made Jack promise to play my audition for Sam, and when he did Sam knew what I knew—which is that I was going all the way to the top.

Some of the best days of my life were spent recording at Sun. It was much different back then than it is today. To cut a record today you need thirty people, but back in those days we would just show up and let 'er rip. Sam didn't want to record "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" at first. He wanted me to record "It'll Be Me" instead, which I did, but that wasn't what people wanted to hear. They wanted to hear real rock 'n' roll. I kept after Sam until he agreed to do it. We cut "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" just like we'd done it onstage, something that would never happen today. When it came out, I was right: It was what the people wanted to hear. It was real rock 'n' roll, and that's what we did at Sun: We cut real rock 'n' roll records. That was the beginning of it all. Rock 'n' roll started at Sun Records, and without Sun there would be no rock 'n' roll.

Elvis asked me how I was possibly going to follow up "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On." Well, I wasn't too worried about that so I just turned to him and said, "Oh, I'll think of something," and walked away. Of course we followed up with "Great Balls of Fire," which we originally recorded for a movie called *Jamboree*. If you watch that movie you'll notice "Great Balls of Fire" is a different cut than on the record. I didn't feel like that original take was quite right. It was good but I knew it could be better. We took that song back to the studio at Sun, recut it, and the rest is history.

A lot of people have asked me over the years what I think of Sam Phillips. It's sure that we didn't always see eye to eye, but you know, he was like a brother to me. He helped me get my start, and for that I will forever be grateful. There will never be another like him and there will never be another Sun Records. That's where it all started, with Sam, and Carl, and Roy, Johnny [AQ: Include last names for, I assume, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, and Johnny Cash here? (A lot of readers might not know who these names are referring to.)], and of course, ole Jerry Lee. Sam Phillips and Sun records changed the whole world.

I can't believe it's been seventy years since Sam founded Sun Records, and I'm blessed to be here to celebrate it with my fans, Sam's fans, Sun Records' fans. God bless you all.

Jerry Lee Lewis



**THE MILLION DOLLAR  
QUARTET SESSION**

*Elvis and Sam Phillips  
with Sun artist Smokey Joe  
Baugh.*



*The Million Dollar Quartet.  
From left: Jerry Lee Lewis,  
Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley,  
Johnny Cash.*

**These days, superstar get-togethers** are almost invariably midwived by managers, labels, networks, or corporate sponsors. The Million Dollar Quartet session was serendipity more than staging, but still had an element of intent.

On Tuesday, December 4, 1956, Sam Phillips and Jack Clement were behind the glass for a Carl Perkins session. Jerry Lee Lewis, trying to earn some money for Christmas, was the pianist. His first single had been out for several days. Sun's notoriously sloppy record-keeping means that we can only rely on our ears to tell us what was recorded, although "Matchbox" (see p. XX) and a "Blue Suede Shoes" knockoff, "Put Your Cat Clothes On," are good bets.

As the session wound down, Elvis Presley appeared with a small entourage. He picked up a guitar and—for love, not money—began to sing. Perkins's band joined him. Phillips realized that an event was unfolding and called Johnny Cash. He made another call across the road to the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. Entertainment reporter Bob Johnson came over with a staff photographer, George B. Pierce, and the head of UPI's Memphis bureau, Leo Soroka.

Thirteen months earlier, Phillips had sold Presley's contract to RCA, plowing some of the proceeds into Cash and Perkins. Presley had become the most celebrated, vilified, and polarizing personality in American entertainment, selling one half of all the records that RCA pressed in 1956. Perkins was trying to recapture the success he'd found in the early months of the year with "Blue Suede Shoes." Almost overnight, Cash had become one of country music's







***“If Sam Phillips had been on his toes,” he added, “he’d have turned the recorder on. . . . That quartet could sell a million.*** —Sam Phillips

*Carl, Elvis, and Johnny.*

*Elvis with Johnny in the background.*

biggest stars, earning an invitation to the Grand Ole Opry—an invitation that often took years to earn. Lewis was determined not to be overshadowed by the company in which he found himself.

Five future Rock & Roll Hall of Fame members in the same room should have ensured a rock concert like no other. Instead, the session was more a rough encapsulation of rock ‘n’ roll’s roots: Southern gospel, Black gospel, country music, doo-wop, blues, and pop.

In his brief article, Johnson coined the phrase “Million Dollar Quartet.” “If Sam Phillips had been on his toes,” he added, “he’d have turned the recorder on. . . . That quartet could sell a million.” Johnson, of course, probably knew that Phillips had done just that. Phillips and Clement rolled tape, but captured more of a \$750,000 trio than a million dollar quartet, as Cash couldn’t be heard. It’s hard to know if Cash was far off mic or if he left before tape rolled. When Johnson wrote about the impromptu concert, he mentioned some songs that never made it to tape and spoke of Cash singing them, so the best guess is that Cash was there for a time, but left.

Phillips mimeographed the article and circulated it to deejays, appending a little postscript in his florid handwriting: “We thought you might like to read first-hand about our little shindig—it was a dilly!”

Poor-quality versions of some songs began appearing surreptitiously around 1980, but their provenance is unknown. It seems that Phillips made copies of the tapes, but it wasn’t until the early 2000s that RCA producer Ernst Mikael Jorgensen found three reels at Graceland and restored them for release in 2006.

Twenty years after the session, RCA moved a portable recording studio to Graceland just in case Presley felt like recording something, anything. In 1956, he needed no encouragement to pick up a guitar and sing all night. “That’s why I hate to get started in these jam sessions,” he says. “I’m always the last to leave.”





# **GWONNA DANCE ALL NIGHT**

## **Hardrock Gunter**

SUN 201



SIDE A

**Fallen Angel**

(H. Gunter)

SIDE B

**Gonna Dance All Night**

(Gunter)

Recorded: Unknown

Released: May 1, 1954

*Hardrock Gunter.*

Sam first heard of Hardrock Gunter through his brother-in-law Jimmy Connolly who had hired Sam as a radio announcer at Florence radio station WLAY in 1942, his first full-time job. (They were not quite brothers-in-law yet.) Connolly was a radio pioneer in his own right, who in 1949 started a show on the Birmingham radio station that he was then managing called The Atomic Boogie Hour, whose primary focus, very much like Dewey Phillips's Red Hot and Blue, was rhythm and blues.

Sidney "Hardrock" Gunter worked at the station in various capacities while pursuing a musical career that began in country music but by 1950 had moved over to boogie-woogie-proto-rock 'n' roll with a hillbilly flavor. (The title of one of his earliest recordings was "We're Gonna Rock 'n' Roll, We're Gonna Dance All Night.") By 1954 Hardrock was thinking of re-recording that song, and Jimmy Connolly, who shared Sam's vision of a new musical day, thought it would be perfect for the Sun label. Sam was sold on the song and tried to get Gunter to come to Memphis to record, but Hardrock, as his name might suggest, possessed a stubborn streak and cut it in Birmingham, sending Sam the master in February 1954. It wasn't really what Sam wanted, he was sure he could have done better, but it rocked some, even with its new truncated title, "Gonna Dance All Night," and Sam released it on May 1, 1954, the same day the Starlite Wranglers record (*see p. XX*) came out.





# THAT'S ALL RIGHT

## Elvis Presley

One of the most famous images in rock 'n' roll history, taken onstage in Tampa, July 31, 1955. It would become the cover of Elvis's first album for RCA.

This really *is* it: the revolution that Sam had both been predicting and searching for had finally arrived. It may or may not represent the moment that rock 'n' roll was born (it doesn't)—but it is without question the birth of something new.

Everyone knows the story, but it is no less startling in the retelling. Scotty Moore gave Elvis his audition on July 4, 1954—Elvis sang mostly ballads and country songs, just about every song he knew, and Scotty was impressed enough to recommend that they schedule a studio session the next night so Sam could hear for himself. The session did not go well. Elvis sang his heart out, desperate to take advantage of the opportunity he had been given, but somehow nothing clicked, and everyone was on the verge of going home (they all had jobs to go to the next day) when all of a sudden Elvis picked up his guitar and started beating on it and singing an old blues that Sam knew but none of them even suspected was in his repertoire. Scotty and bassist Bill Black soon fell in, and Sam, who had been dithering at the board (a technique he had employed at least since Howlin' Wolf first entered his studio—he didn't want the musicians to pay any attention to him, he wanted them above all to be *themselves*) suddenly snapped to. “What are you doing?” Sam said. “We don't know,” said Scotty. “Well, back up,” said Sam, “try to find a place to start, and do it again.”

The song was “That's All Right,” an up-tempo number originally recorded by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup in 1946, and it came together so perfectly, so seemingly accidentally (though Sam didn't believe in either perfection or accidents), so pure in its essence, that there was almost nothing to do with it but get it down on tape. Sam didn't touch it, didn't add slapback, didn't call for more than one or two takes. And it's just as timeless today as it was then, and just as uncategorizable. Is it folk music? Is it rock 'n' roll? Is it country-flavored blues? It is, simply, itself.

It caught on instantly, became a turntable hit (DJ Dewey Phillips's turntable)—caught on so fast in fact that by the next day Sam was desperate for a B-side so he could put out the record. After a number of attempts over the next couple of days, Bill Black finally came up with the idea of doing much the same thing with a country number that they had done on the Arthur Crudup blues. He started “beating on his bass and singing ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky’ in a high falsetto voice,” Scotty said, “more or less mimicking Bill Monroe [this was Bill Monroe's classic bluegrass tune, which was, in Monroe's version, a waltz], and Elvis started banging on the guitar, playing rhythm and singing, and I joined in and it just gelled.” Sam applied a *lot* of slapback this time, he slathered it on in a way that he rarely would again, so the sound bounces around, and the lyrics chase each other in a manner far removed from Sam's conception of “more natural” natural sound. But of course, it was in its own way a classic, too, and one that would go on to influence so much of what was still to come.

SUN 209



SIDE A

**That's All Right**

(Arthur Crudup)

SIDE B

**Blue Moon of Kentucky**

(Bill Monroe)

Recorded: July 4 and July 7, 1954

Released: July 19, 1954



Elvis on stage at Ellis Auditorium, Memphis, with Dewey Phillips. He was the bottom of the bill on a country music show, starring Faron Young, Martha Carson, and Ferlin Husky.





# ***THE CHICKEN (DANCE WITH YOU)***

**Rosco Gordon**

FLIP/SUN 237



SIDE A

**The Chicken  
(Dance with You)**

(Gordon)

SIDE B

**Love For You Baby**

(Gordon)

Recorded: February 1956

Released: April 25, 1956

*Rosco and Butch the Chicken celebrating the success of "The Chicken" with Sam Phillips.*

*Rosco heading up his self-titled orchestra, with Billy "Red" Love on the piano.*

Here we have, in a triumphant return to Sun, one of the first artists Sam recorded (even before "Rocket 88"), one of his earliest hitmakers, and one of his favorite "originals." Sam was taken with Rosco's music from the start. He heard in him not a *good* piano player but a different *kind* of piano player, with a unique, rolling style. "Sam [told me], 'What you're playing, nobody in the world is going to play that but you.' Said, 'I don't know what it is. It's not blues, it's not pop, it's not rock. So we gonna call it "Rosco's Rhythm.'" That's what he called it. That's where that came from." And that's what gave Sam his second number-one R&B hit on Chess, in 1952, with Rosco's grisly humoresque, "Booted."

"The Chicken" was a different matter altogether, a straightforward novelty-dance number, propelled by Rosco's natural high spirits, which, even in the midst of the meteoric rise of "Blue Suede Shoes" on the charts, was a substantial regional hit. Not only that, it resurrected Rosco's career, which would culminate in glorious fashion with his 1960 number-two R&B hit on the Vee-Jay label, "Just a Little Bit," which went on to become a pop and R&B standard.

For "The Chicken," Rosco toured, naturally with a chicken (his name was Butch), and they were quite a hit until Butch died at an early age of alcoholism, perhaps brought on by the reward his owner offered him as an inducement to perform. And though Butch had a successor, Rosco never felt quite the same kinship with him, and by that time, in any case, the record was over.





# EPILOGUE

**Shelby Singleton died in 2009, six years after Sam Phillips.** In 2021, Singleton's entire holdings were purchased by Primary Wave, a company that specializes in music publishing, branding, master ownership, and licensing. The company began in 2006 with the purchase of a share of Kurt Cobain's music publishing and expanded rapidly. It became one of the first independent music companies to use institutional funds to acquire recorded and published music and life rights. Primary Wave digitized the catalog and began making Sam Phillips' recordings available on some platforms that Phillips himself would have recognized and some he would not.

Sam Phillips started Sun Records out of frustration, but with a clear conviction that he was in the right place at the right time. His belief that Memphis was the crossroads of American music grew almost messianic. He had an artistic compass in the same way that some record producers have a commercial compass, but he couldn't ignore the commercial here and now. When he designed his first piece of stationery, he coined a slogan: "Consistently better records for higher profits." It was an endearingly modest boast at the time, but those consistently better records are still the beating heart of popular music. So much old music is sucked into the void with those who once listened to it. You had to be there. Recordings that span the years are those in which the singer, the song, and the listener become one. Everything extraneous is stripped away. The producer's job is to create the conditions in which that can happen. Fight down every urge to make it more complex than it needs to be. And to not be afraid of something that wasn't there before.

**That's what Sam Phillips did. That's why we're still listening.**





# 70 JAHRE SUN RECORDS: DIE GEBURT DES ROCK'N'ROLL!

Peter Guralnick/Colin Escott

## THE BIRTH OF ROCK'N'ROLL: 70 YEARS OF SUN RECORDS

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„Ich suchte nach Leuten, die entrechtet waren. Sie waren politisch und wirtschaftlich entrechtet, und – um die Wahrheit zu sagen – sie waren auch musikalisch entrechtet“,

– **Sam Phillips**, der Gründer von Sun Records in einem Interview über seine Motivation bei der Suche nach Talenten.

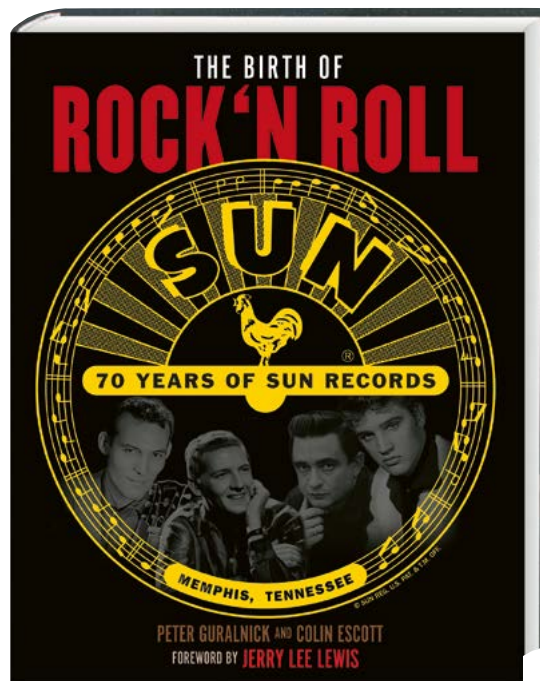
Der grossformatige Bildband liefert mit hunderten von Fotos aus dem Sun-Archiv einen faszinierenden Einblick in die Geschichte des wohl berühmtesten Independent Labels anhand von 70 wichtigen Singles. In Sam Phillips' Sun Record Studios entstand anfangs der 50iger Hillbilly, eine Mischung aus Blues-, Bluegrass- und Country-Musik und danach in fließendem Übergang der Rock'n'Roll.

In kurzem Abstand erschienen die ersten Aufnahmen von Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison und Carl Perkins. Titel wie "Blue Suede Shoes," "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "Breathless," "I Walk the Line," "Mystery Train," "Good Rockin' Tonight" wurden weltweit zu Millionsellern.

This is a fascinating look at the history of Sun Records, the label that started Rock n' Roll, told through 70 of its iconic recordings.

In Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1950s, there was hard-edged blues playing on Beale Street, and hillbilly boogie on the outskirts of town. But at Sam Phillips' Sun Records studio on Union Avenue, there was something different going on – a whole lotta shakin', rockin', and rollin'. Sun Records: the company that launched Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, and Carl Perkins. The label that brought the world, "Blue Suede Shoes," "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "Breathless," "I Walk the Line," "Mystery Train," "Good Rockin' Tonight."

The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll: 70 Years of Sun Records is the official history of this legendary label, and looks at its story in a unique way: through the lens of 70 of its most iconic recordings. From the



early days with primal blues artists like Howlin' Wolf and B.B. King to long nights in the studio with Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis, you will see how the label was shaped and how it redefined American music. Accompanying the recordings is the label's origin story and a look at the mission of the label today, as well as "Sun Spot" sidebars—a fascinating dive into subjects such as how the iconic logo was created, the legendary Million Dollar Quartet sessions, and how the song "Harper Valley, PTA" funded the purchase of the label.

Written by two of the most acclaimed music writers of our time, **Peter Guralnick** and **Colin Escott**, and featuring hundreds of rare images from the Sun archives as well as a foreword by music legend Jerry Lee Lewis, this is a one-of-a-kind book for anyone who wants to know where it all started.



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