

Burn Brightly and Fade Fast: The Story of Sun Records

Rock ‘n’ roll owes its origins to a one-room converted auto repair shop in Memphis, Tennessee and a man named Sam Phillips. As a talent scout, producer, and record-label operator, Sam Phillips defined the genre of rock ‘n’ roll and, consequently, the evolution of popular music in the 20th century through his label Sun Records.¹ From his tiny recording studio in Memphis, Phillips discovered Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Howlin’ Wolf, Jerry Lee Lewis, B.B. King, and many more famous performers. Situated at a geographic and cultural crossroads in Memphis, between Nashville, the home of country music, and Chicago, the capital of the Blues, Sun Records codified the new sound of rock ‘n’ roll, which bridged racial, economic, and generational divides in the 1950s and 60s.



Following the end of World War II, America underwent major economic growth and an accompanying ‘baby boom’ in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This generation of youth became known as the first ‘teenagers’, who had both time and money on their hands. These young people, with the freedom to spend their money on leisure activities, encapsulated a new marketing segment for all industries, but especially music.² In the early 1950s, the term ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ demarcated the mainstream teenager’s taste in music.³

In lieu of a singular, cohesive sound, rock music is defined by its historical context, audience, body of criticism, and industry.⁴ The roots of rock music

predated the 1950s, however the genre did not come to exist until it became the dominant sound appealing to a mainstream white teenage audience.⁵ The reactionary nature of defining rock music determined which artists belonged to the genre, and how society perceived it. Sun Records scouted some of the most influential rock artists of that era, propelling their music to reach a mass market audience, and articulating the sounds, styles, and culture of the genre. The headlining artists who recorded at Sun Records excelled in their own era, but their lasting impact lies in how they influenced the artists who came after them, including The Beatles, The Who, Led Zeppelin, Bruce Springsteen, The Rolling Stones, and many more.⁶

Sam Phillips opened his recording studio in Memphis in 1949. First known as the ‘Memphis Recording Studio,’ Phillips launched the business with the slogan “We record anything – anywhere – any time.”⁷ He struggled to keep his business afloat from the onset, and soon realized that Black artists in Memphis lacked the opportunity to record their music and gain the attention of record labels. Phillips built his

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business in the early years by recording up and coming rhythm & blues (R&B) and jazz artists.⁸ He courted Black musicians including B.B. King and Ike Turner, and through developing a reputation in the Black community, came to record what we now know as the first ever rock 'n' roll track: Jackie Brenston's 'Rocket 88.'⁹ In his first few years, Phillips served only as the producer and sound engineer for these records, and leased the masters to more prominent record labels like Chess Records and Modern/RPM.¹⁰ However, seeking to capture more value from his clients, in 1952 Phillips re-launched his business to incorporate a record label under the name 'Sun Records.'¹¹ He continued to focus his business on Black artists from 1950-54, at which point he began to search for a white artist who could bring the same feel and style of Black music – but who would be more marketable to a segregated America.¹² He found that in Elvis Presley.

Born on January 5, 1923 in Florence, Alabama, Sam Phillips began his career as a radio announcer and engineer at various stations in the South.¹³ When he opened Sun Records, Phillips sought a raw, authentic sound from the country and R&B artists he recorded. Music critic Bill Dahl described Phillips as, "An eccentric character whose riveting gaze could instantly inspire a recording artist to heights he never knew he could attain."¹⁴ Phillips became the first person nominated to the Rock 'n' Roll, Blues, and Country Hall of Fame.¹⁵

Located off the beaten path in Memphis, and far from being a commercial success, Sun Records made a name for itself through its diverse artists, unique sound, and ability to reach across racial divides to produce ground-breaking music. Southern country and R&B met both literally and figuratively at Sun Records. Situated deep in the South's 'Bible Belt', Memphis housed a diverse range of musical styles and artists, but existed far enough away from the influence of Nashville and Chicago to maintain its own unique sound. In Phillips' studio, country artists played alongside R&B musicians, and the mash-up of their sounds, styles, instruments, and cultures became what we now know as rock 'n' roll. Outside of Memphis, musicians like Howlin' Wolf and Johnny Cash likely would have had to conform with the musical styles already popular on the radio at the time. But inside of Sun Records, Sam Phillips encouraged them to find their own unique sounds, and push the boundaries of popular music.

In his hustle to keep his fledgling business afloat, Phillips made his own contributions to desegregating mainstream music at the height of the Jim Crow era. In his incessant drive to push each of his artists to uncover their most authentic, rough sound, Phillips rewrote the rules of 'Black' and 'white' music. Sun artists colored outside the lines of traditionally Black or white music of the time. The crossover of musical styles and artists at the label fostered the growth of rock 'n' roll and laid the groundwork for desegregating mainstream music. This culminated in 1963 when Billboard Magazine dropped its Black music category in favor of ranking all artists, regardless of race, on the same chart.¹⁶ While Phillips shifted away from recording Black artists after 1954, he still believed he was contributing to the desegregation of music by bringing traditionally Black music and musical styles to a mainstream, primarily white, audience.¹⁷ Others, however, felt that Black musical styles were being lifted and appropriated to capture white dollars with white artists.

The distinct 'Sun Records sound' derived not just from Phillips' ear, but also the particular acoustics of the studio itself. The unique dimensions and shape of the small studio space created an unusual sound, which musicians noted changed when instruments were repositioned by even just a few feet.¹⁸ Phillips sometimes even recorded artists in the bathroom or the reception area to capture what he thought of as that 'imperfectly perfect' sound, which encapsulated the experience of hearing the artist live.¹⁹ That particular Sun Records sound, heard on Elvis' 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' and other tracks, became known as the 'slapback echo' effect, which many have since sought to replicate. The sound resulted from two recording devices placed at a distance from each other, which facilitated an audible delay and echo.²⁰ Phillips sought to uncover an "indigenous sound" within the confines of his unique acoustic space.²¹ He once said, "There were a lot of independent labels coming out with great R&B records. Mine was the old thing. I just went out to get gutbucket, and in the main, we did that and that set us apart from a lot of other great labels."²² Sun Records' distinct acoustics, raw and unpolished sounds, and diverse roster of artists differentiated the label from the rest of the mainstream music and laid the groundwork for its unparalleled success.

Elvis Presley embodied each of the qualities that made Sun Records unique in a crowded field. Popular music historian, Will Straw, described Elvis as saying, "Elvis Presley still stands best for rock 'n' roll itself, a glorious, flawed, youthful hybrid of American sounds – rhythm and blues, country, bluegrass, Black and white church music, easy listening ballads, novelty numbers."²³ Elvis walked into Sun Records

in 1953 ostensibly to record a song for his mother.²⁴ He displayed a remarkable vocal range and diversity in his style of delivery,²⁵ as seen in his first hit, a remake of Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right." From his roots in Mississippi steeped in traditional Black music, Elvis adopted a similar croon and growl vocal style in his Sun Records recordings. From the onset, Elvis displayed an intense physicality in how he performed his music, jumping and dancing around the recording studio while singing his songs. Under Phillips' supervision, Elvis experimented with developing his own hybrid sound encapsulating elements of the country, R&B, and gospel music he grew up with in the South.

Elvis' adoption of Black music sounds and performance styles prompts important questions on cultural appropriation. We can see Elvis' decisions as an appropriation of Black music sounds and styles to sell records to a mainstream white audience. However, accepting this criticism at face value risks ignoring the nuance of Elvis' deep connections to Black gospel, R&B, and jazz music of that time. The son of a poor white family in the South, Elvis was heavily influenced by Black musicians in the region. We see evidence of this through his voice, music styles, song choice, and distinctive physicality. Viewing his actions exclusively as cultural appropriation discounts the theory that Elvis sought to honor the musicians of his youth by bringing their sounds and styles to mainstream audiences, understanding that they themselves were siloed from popular music at that time.²⁶ We see this in Elvis' rendition of Big Mama Thornton's 'Hound Dog.' Willa Mae "Big Mama" Thornton originally recorded the song in 1952 with an idiosyncratic gruffness and growling quality to her vocals to emphasize the frustration of the song's protagonist.²⁷ Elvis seems to echo Big Mama Thornton's distinctive vocal style in his own rendition²⁸, as an homage to her unique talent and in recognition that his platform as a white musician could bring her music to a much wider audience.

Elvis unjustly appropriated Black culture by failing to credit those who inspired him, let alone distribute the profits of his success. He also contributed to desegregating popular music in his time. By aligning his sound closely with Black artists of the time, Elvis blurred the lines of Black and white music, and introduced mainstream audiences to new sounds and styles they may not have heard otherwise.



Elvis remained at Sun Records only until 1955, when financial troubles at the label prompted Sam Phillips to sell his contract to RCA Victor. The contract sold for \$35,000, the highest ever paid for an artist at that time.²⁹ However, Elvis remained a member of the Sun Records community even after he exited the label. In 1956, fresh off of his infamous performance on the Ed Sullivan show, Elvis paid an impromptu visit to the studio while Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash worked.³⁰ Phillips encouraged all four to venture into the recording studio and play together. They sang primarily gospel songs, which all knew from growing up in the South. Through the recordings, we can witness the spontaneous magic that abounded when four of the most talented musicians of their time played together in one room. Dubbed the 'Million Dollar Quartet' by the local paper, the recordings from the session emerged in 1981.³¹

Elvis keeps company with an impressive roster of country, rock, and R&B musicians at Sun Records. Johnny Cash recorded his first songs at Sun Records in 1954. Born and raised in Arkansas, Cash arrived in Memphis with a repertoire of almost exclusively gospel music. As the story goes, when Phillips first heard Cash play, he told him, "Go home and sin – and then come back with something I can sell."³² Cash returned with his own songs, and produced his first hit 'Cry, Cry, Cry' with Sun Records.³³ In 1957, Cash left Sun to sign with Columbia Records.³⁴

Along with Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley, Sun Records' artists included Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich, Roy Orbison, Rufus Thomas, Barbara Pittman, and B.B. King. But the artist that Phillips claimed was the most talented of all he worked with was the great Howlin' Wolf. Born Chester Arthur Burnett in White Station, Mississippi, Howlin' Wolf studied the blues under local legends Charley Patton and Sonny Boy Williamson.³⁵ Ike Turner introduced Wolf to Sam Phillips in 1951, and together they produced a number of records including Wolf's first hit, 'Moanin' at Midnight.'³⁶

THE LONDON HOWLIN' WOLF SESSIONS



featuring

Eric Clapton Steve Winwood Bill Wyman Charlie Watts

Phil Gallo for Variety magazine wrote, "Howlin' Wolf was a perfect example of what Phillips sought in a performer. He specialized in music with a raw sound and he often encouraged musicians to drop any affectations that make them sound like popular artists of the day..."³⁷ Phillips himself said, "When I heard Howlin' Wolf, I said, 'This is for me. This is where the soul of man never dies.'"³⁸ Some of the best-known rock and blues musicians cite Howlin' Wolf as a significant influence. Wolf's 1971 London Sessions record featured backing support from Ringo Starr of the Beatles, Charlie Watts and Bill Wyman of the Rolling Stones, and the legendary guitarist (and big Wolf fan) Eric Clapton.³⁹

While its success peaked in the mid-1950s, Sun Records would last for less than a decade. In 1957 Phillips created a second label, Sun International, to expand into new genres and new cities – but his second venture never really took off, and

he closed the label by 1963.⁴⁰ Sun Records also released its last single in 1963. The music industry became dominated by a few major labels, making it nearly impossible for independents like Sun Records to continue.⁴¹ In 1969, Phillips sold the label's masters to record executive Shelby Singleton.⁴² Phillips largely exited the music industry after the label closed, having established his wealth independently through investing in the Holiday Inn hotel chain and radio stations throughout the South.⁴³ The last album Sam Phillips ever worked on was John Prine's 1979 'Pink Cadillac', for which he produced two tracks.⁴⁴ Just before Phillips passed in 2003, the original Sun Records studio at 706 Union Avenue was named a national historic landmark. The studio continues to be used by artists seeking to reclaim some of the magic in the space, including U2, Bonnie Raitt, and Ringo Starr.⁴⁵

The legacy of Sam Phillips and Sun Records lies in the sounds created within those walls. The Sun Records story is not one of immense wealth or enduring business success. It is the story of one fledgling record studio, in a small Southern city, that balked the conventions of what constitutes popular music, refused to abide by racial musical delineations, and established a new sound and genre, which forever altered the trajectory of popular music.

Suggested Sun Records Playlist

1. Mistreated Woman – *B.B. King* (1950)
2. Rocket 88 – *Jackie Brenston & His Delta Cats* (1951)
3. Moanin' At Midnight – *Howlin' Wolf* (1951)
4. Oh Red – *Howlin' Wolf* (1952)
5. Hound Dog – *Big Mama Thornton* (1952)
6. Hound Dog – *Elvis Presley* (1956)
7. That's All Right – *Elvis Presley* (1956)
8. Cry! Cry! Cry! – *Johnny Cash* (1955)
9. Hey Porter – *Johnny Cash* (1955)
10. Blue Suede Shoes – *Carl Perkins* (1956)
11. Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On – *Jerry Lee Lewis* (1957)
12. As Long as I Live – *Jerry Lee Lewis* (1961)
13. Go Go Go – *Roy Orbison* (1956)
14. Domino – *Roy Orbison* (1956)
15. When The Saints Go Marchin' In – *Million Dollar Quartet (Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins)* (1956)
16. Down By The Riverside – *Million Dollar Quartet (Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins)* (1956)
17. Rockin' Daddy – *Howlin' Wolf, Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood, Bill Wyman, Charlie Watts, Hubert Sumlin* (1971)
18. How Lucky – *John Prine* (1979)



Endnotes

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