

# “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On”--Jerry Lee Lewis (1957)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Joe Bonomo (guest post)\*



*Jerry Lee Lewis*



*Original label*

The opening two minutes of Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” are so striking and irrepressible that they all but guaranteed the song would be a major hit. The second half ensured that the song, and “The Killer,” would become unforgettable.

Released in April 1957, “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” was Lewis’s second single, following “Crazy Arms,” which had failed to chart. But Lewis, well aware of his own potency, and his singular talent, and buoyed by producer Sam Phillips’s intuitive work in Sun Studio, brought “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” into the recording sessions confident that it could be a hit. How Lewis came to know the song is a predictably murky tale. Sources suggest that he’d learned it from Big Maybelle’s or Roy Hall’s earlier versions; Lewis himself claimed to have heard it from the singer Johnny Littlejohn at the Wagon Wheel nightclub in Natchez, Mississippi. Force of nature that he is, Lewis usually transforms the landscape of any tune he moves through, and “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” was no different.

Recording sessions took place in February 1957, in Sun Studios at 706 Union Street in Memphis, Tennessee. Lewis played piano and sang; backing him were Roland Janes on guitar and J.M. Van Eaton on drums. Engineer Jack Clement supervised the recordings. Bathed in the fabled Sun Studio slap-back echo, they’d produced several unsatisfying takes until Lewis, encouraged by Janes and Van Eaton, pushed the song toward a new arrangement. The trio had been playing “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” live, and onstage the song took on unprecedented, fiery dimension. It was in front of crowds where Lewis added the break-down in the song’s second half; originating as an impromptu jam riding waves of crowd response, the section moves the song toward ecstasy and lewdness, translating the implied sexiness in the title into something sensational.

In the studio during the break-down, Lewis quiets things but turns up the heat, *shushing* Janes and Van Eaton until they, like the listener, become witnesses. “Let’s get real low

one time now,” Lewis says to his musicians, but he could be winking at the woman in his head, too. Over the course of 24 bars Lewis cajoles, begs, and commands her, and everyone listening, to come on over, shake, baby, shake, stand in one spot and wiggle around just a little bit, the tension between being good (standing still) and being bad (shaking it) made deliriously, dangerously implicit. Lewis winds the words up in and around and through the beat, syncopating them. At the close, he brings back Janes and Van Eaton, riding the wave that his piano playing has created, and he’s hollering the title now until the song crashes down, spent. “Just give me a decent piano, a good engineer, and a microphone and I’ll get the sound,” Lewis boasted later. “‘Whole Lotta Shakin’” was like a country song with a good tune, but I put the beat to it and rocked it and put the real feel to it.”

Sun released the single in April, but it had to contend with Elvis’s massive hit “All Shook Up,” which dominated all charts throughout April and May. It registered first in country & western markets in June, but was a solid national top ten pop hit by September, reaching the third spot on the “Billboard” pop chart and number one on its R&B and Country charts. Wildly raw for record-buying teenagers in 1957, “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” was an enormous commercial success and did not leave the charts until January 1958.

As confident a performer as Jerry Lee Lewis is, he’s also a man riddled with tensions. During the October 1957 recording sessions for “Great Balls Of Fire,” the follow-up to “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” Lewis and Sam Phillips engaged in an infamous conversation that has entered rock and roll lore. As the tapes rolled, Lewis, troubled, his fingers resting on his beloved piano keys, admitted to being hesitant recording a song that he felt was blasphemous, arguing vehemently that it was his duty as an Evangelical Christian to renounce temptations and all materialistic goods. Phillips countered, suggesting that by recording the song—by playing music, his God-vouchsafed gift—Lewis might in fact save some souls along the way. “How can the devil save souls?” Lewis wondered, baffled as to a satisfying answer.

Raised in the Pentecostal Baptist church yet tuned to feverish R&B and worldly honky-tonk, Lewis would be forever at war internally between the sacred and the profane, a conflict borne out in his very playing on “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On.” Memphis producer and musician Jim Dickinson noted that one of Lewis’s musical signatures had its origins in the church. In his early recordings, Lewis would often interrupt the standard boogie-woogie left-hand progression by omitting the flattened-seventh—the “blue” note that winks and thrusts a hip—and repeating the fifth and sixth, creating an obsessive, driving momentum, eager to bust out, barely contained. Listen to Lewis’s left hand: he plays “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” just this way. “That really was revolutionary, almost inexplicable,” Dickinson claimed. “Maybe Ella Mae Morse, maybe Moon Mullican had done it, but not in a way where it became the propelling force of the song. Rock & roll piano up to that point had been defined by Roscoe Gordon, Ike Turner, and to an extent Ray Charles. None of them were doing that. Even Little Richard, as primitive as he plays, wasn’t doing that shuffle.”\*\*

Dickinson adds, “There was something in Jerry Lee that didn’t want to play that seventh, and that’s the church. Certainly in white spiritual music you have to avoid sevenths. There’s something that is secular in making that seventh in the change.” So, Lewis avoids the blue notes—reigning in his roving hand—but he plays them in every other way possible. In just under three minutes he turns a song that he didn’t write into a song that he’ll own forever, an early rock and roll classic blending R&B and boogie woogie, dance and sex, stamped with a personality as large and tortured as the nation. “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” is among the touchstones of mid-century popular culture. “That’s the mother-humper of them all!” Lewis acknowledged later. “I wrote ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’.’ I re-wrote the whole song. They oughta give me credit for writin’ the song.”

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

\*\*Bonomo, Joe. “Jerry Lee Lewis: Lost and Found.” (New York: Continuum, 2011). This and subsequent Dickinson quote are from the author’s interview.