

## “Blue Suede Shoes”—Carl Perkins (1955)

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Essay by Mark Bristol with Ken Burke (guest post)\*



*Carl Perkins*

Raised by sharecroppers near Tiptonville, TN, Carl Perkins grew up on Southern Gospel music both from church and from African-American field hands. Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe's music on the “Grand Ole Opry” gave Carl the urge to play guitar, so his dad made him his first one out of a cigar box, later buying him a used and battered Gene Autry model. Young Perkins learned some chords and licks from “Uncle” John Westbrook, a neighboring sharecropper, songs like “Matchbox Blues” (which he later recorded), and how to connect the sound from the strings to his soul.

At 14, he wrote “Let Me Take You To The Movie Magg,” which later convinced Sam Phillips to offer him a Sun Records contract, after Carl begged for a chance to be heard. Carl had been playing the beer joints around Jackson, TN, and on local radio with his brothers Jay and Clayton (and later on with W.S. “Fluke” Holland on drums) when his wife Val heard Elvis' version of “Blue Moon Of Kentucky” on the radio and said to Carl, “That sounds like y'all's music.”

“Movie Magg” was released March 19, 1955 on Phillips' Flip label, with the much more country “Turn Around” on the other side becoming a regional success. Johnny Cash had become a Sun artist by then, and he, Elvis and Perkins toured regionally together. Carl's second record “Gone, Gone, Gone” was released on Sun, and also was a regional success, with “Let The Jukebox Keep On Playing” on its flipside.

Perkins' next release “Blue Suede Shoes” is one of the most iconic records in the history of American popular music. It was the first record to make it to the top (or very nearly--it did top many regional charts) in all three national lists being compiled at the time--the Pop, Country, and the R&B charts. The R&B charts had recently been renamed by Jerry Wexler, working for “Billboard” magazine in the late '40s, before he became a partner at Atlantic Records; they'd been previously known as the Race Music Charts. That's an indication that the song had touched a nerve all across America and for a diverse variety of Americans.

The original inspiration for “Blue Suede Shoes” had come from Johnny Cash, who had an African-American Air Force buddy who'd referred to his regulation footwear as blue suede shoes. Perkins didn't know what to do with the idea until one night playing at a dance he heard a fellow admonish his girlfriend, “uh uh, don't step on my suedes.” Carl thought it odd that the shoes could be more important than the guy's pretty dancing companion, but it sparked the song machinery, and later that

night he put the song together, misspelling one word as “swade.” Trying the nursery rhyme approach, he eventually came up with the opening, “It's one for the money, two for the show....”

Later at a recording session on December 19, 1955, Carl spontaneously used the phrase “Go Cat Go” in take two instead of “Go Man Go,” and that was another of the elements that made the song fairly unique for its time. Elvis had been referred to as the “Hillbilly Cat,” and down in Texas (where both of them toured a lot early on) other strains of what came to be known as Rockabilly music were called Cat Music by those who would never have used the pejorative term bandied about by others and which involved the “N” word.

“Honey Don't,” chosen for the record’s flip side, was the side being played on his hometown stations in Jackson, TN, when Perkins received his first two 78 rpm copies of his record, broken, in the mail from his producer Sam Phillips. But Bill Randle in Cleveland--an extremely influential DJ--was playing “Blue Suede Shoes,” causing a Cleveland distributor to order 25,000 copies. The song was #1 in Memphis for three months solid, and at one point was selling 20,000 copies a day in Dallas alone, where Carl played the song every Saturday night for a month on the regionally broadcast “Big D Jamboree!” Phillips brought a glitter encrusted pair of blue suede shoes and presented them to Perkins at the “Big D Jamboree” one night--the song's success was assured--and made sure he got a photo for publicity. Perkins and his band played the song on ABC-TV's “Ozark Jamboree” March 17, the same day his record had reached #3 on the R&B charts and the same night Elvis performed the song on CBS's “Stage Show.” “Blue Suede Shoes” was soon also covered by Sid King & The Five Strings out of Dallas, and by Pee Wee King's band and many others, but Carl's version was the million seller success.

Scheduled to appear on Perry Como's TV show March 24, Carl and his band were in a bad car wreck while *en route* which seriously injured him and his brother Jay, the rhythm guitarist for his band. Elvis Presley visited them in the hospital, telling them that RCA wanted him to release the song, but he refused to cover it and steal their thunder. By then the original version was slipping down the charts, and Perkins said it'd be OK. Elvis' version only made #20, but Elvis had helped promote Carl's record by singing the song on national TV himself, before allowing RCA to release it as a single. Presley's single “Heartbreak Hotel” held the top spot on “Billboard's” Pop and Country Charts at the same time, but Carl's “Blue Suede Shoes” did better on the R&B charts. Jay Perkins appeared with Carl and the band on the Como show eventually, wearing a neck brace from his broken neck. Jay passed away in 1958, and surely his injuries were a contributing factor.

Perkins never really matched that success again, but he'd made his mark, and in addition to all the cover versions, many subsequent songs also made reference to blue suede shoes--for example, Chuck Berry's “Roll Over Beethoven,” which states “Early in the mornin' I'm a givin' you the warnin' don't you step on my blue suede shoes.” Carl referred to them again in his own “Put Your Cat Clothes On” for Columbia Records: “Took my blue suede shoes down to old Mobile, got to rockin' with the rhythm run 'em over at the heel.” Perkins' version of “Blue Suede Shoes” made #95 on “Rolling Stone's” list of “500 Songs That Shaped Rock 'n' Roll” (Presley's version is #423) and also made NPR's top 100 too.

Perkins did have more success. His “Boppin' The Blues” and “Dixie Fried” made the country top 10; “Your True Love” and “Pink Pedal Pushers” made top 20 Country; and later “Country Boy's Dream,” “Shine, Shine, Shine” and “Restless” made it into the top 30 of the country lists.

While the Beatles never released a version of “Blue Suede Shoes,” they did perform it as part of a medley at the “Get Back” sessions. John Lennon later performed it with the Plastic Ono Band, and it

appears on “Live Peace in Toronto 1969.” But the Beatles did record *three* Perkins tunes, with Carl in attendance at the session: “Matchbox,” “Honey, Don't” and “Everybody's Tryin' to Be My Baby.” They played his “Sure To Fall (In Love with You)” on the BBC and that too is available. The group Ten Years After included “Blue Suede Shoes” in their medley in the film “Woodstock.”

Johnny Cash had Carl Perkins as part of his show for much of the '60s; Holland became Cash's drummer and Johnny had a #1 country hit with Carl's song “Daddy Sang Bass” in 1968. Johnny Rivers brought “Blue Suede Shoes” back to the Top 40 again in 1973, and the Judds recorded Carl's co-write “Let Me Tell You About Love,” taking it to #1 on the Country charts in 1989.

“Blue Suede Shoes” is the opening song in the popular Broadway musical “Million Dollar Quartet,” inspired by another promo picture opportunity that occurred while Carl was recording “Matchbox” in the Sun studio with Jerry Lee Lewis on piano. Elvis dropped by the studio after his first appearance in Vegas. Sam phoned Johnny Cash and a news photographer while the guys were messing around singing various songs--a lot of Gospel--with Elvis at the piano. Cash was only there a brief time, but many years later the tape--that's right, Sam was rolling tape--resurfaced and was released!

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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.