

# Sun Records Sessions--Elvis Presley (1954-1955)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by James L. Dickerson (guest post)\*



*Elvis Presley*



*Original label*



*Sam Phillips*

Elvis Presley's Sun Records Sessions began on the evening of July 5, 1954, at a downtown Memphis recording studio owned by Sam Phillips. When Elvis, Scotty Moore and Bill Black arrived at Memphis Recording Service, it was a hot, sticky day, with the temperature soaring in the 90s. Air-conditioning was in use in Memphis at that time, but not used in recording studios where extraneous noise was always a technical concern.

The session came about after weeks of nudging by guitarist Scotty Moore. Sam had released a record titled "My Kind of Carryin' On" by Scotty's country band the Starlite Wranglers. The record hadn't sold well and Scotty was eager to convince Sam to give them another chance. When the studio owner expressed little interest in another record with the Starlite Wranglers, Scotty asked what, exactly, he was looking for, pointing out that he could play any type of music. It didn't have to be country.

Sam, who already had recorded a number one rhythm and blues record with Ike Turner's "Rocket 88," said it wasn't something he could put into in words, explaining cryptically, "I'll know it when I hear it."

Sitting in on the conversation with Scotty and Sam was Marion Keisker, Sam's receptionist, business manager and silent partner. She reminded Sam of the young man named Elvis who had come into the studio a while back to record a birthday song for his mother. She thought he had a good voice.

"Maybe," Sam said, and changed the subject.

For two weeks Scotty pelted him with questions about when he could call the boy with the "funny" name. Finally, Sam relented and told Scotty to audition Elvis. If he felt he could carry the vocals he would schedule a session for them.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Elvis met Scotty, along with Starlite Wranglers bassist Bill Black, at Scotty's home for an informal audition. Afterward, Scotty called Sam and gave him a positive report. He was upbeat, but not gushing in his evaluation of Elvis's talents. Sam told him to bring Elvis into the studio the following day, along with bassist Bill Black.

At the first session, no one was sure what they were supposed to do. Elvis had never worked with Scotty or Bill, so he did not know what to expect. Scotty and Bill were less concerned about Elvis as they were Sam, a garrulous and enigmatic figure who was known primarily for his studio work with black musicians such as Howlin' Wolf. He had a reputation for bluntness. After several hours of traveling down musical dead-ends, they took a break. By then it was around midnight and the uncirculated air in the studio was rancid. The only way to get a breath of "fresh" air was to stick your head out the back door into the prickly heat and suck in a lung full of urban-filtered air. When they returned to their instruments, Elvis suddenly began strumming his acoustic guitar, singing a blues song, "That's All Right," previously recorded by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Taken by the beat, Bill jumped up and started slapping his bass in time to the music. Then Scotty joined in on electric guitar. The music was fast and reckless, just the type of rhythm Scotty preferred. Dating back to his days in the U.S. Navy, especially when he was seeing service in China during the Communist revolution, Scotty had been experimenting with flinger slides and bent-string pauses. For the first time, he heard a song that showed him where those long-festering guitar licks belonged.

Sam heard it, too. When they finished, he stuck his head out of the control room door and asked, "What are ya'll doing?"

Scotty answered, "Just foolin' around."

"Well, it didn't sound too bad through the doors," he said. "Try it again. Let me get in there and turn the mics on."

They played the song several times while Sam adjusted the microphones, finally moving Elvis's microphone closer to his face.

After they felt they had the song down pat, Sam started the tape recorder.

Once they finished, they sat in silence, waiting for a response from Sam.

Finally, after a brief pause, Sam stuck his head out the door and said, "Man, that's good. It's different. What is it?"

They looked at each other, speechless.

Finally, Scotty said, "Well, you said you were looking for something different."

Sam shocked them by saying they had one side of a record. They needed another song for the flip side.

Encouraged, they continued for another couple of hours, finally calling it a day at 2 a.m.

The following night, Elvis, Scotty and Bill returned to the recording studio filled with energy and optimism, although no one had a clue about what to do next. As they did the previous day, they experimented with different songs. Nothing worked. Finally, Sam told them to take a couple of days off.

By the time they returned to the studio on Thursday, they were local celebrities. Sam had taken "That's All Right," to a local deejay, who insisted on playing it on the radio. The song was an immediate hit.

Again, they got lucky. Using the same strategy of taking a popular song and flipping it to their liking, they worked up Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky," a beautiful waltz that had been a country music hit in 1946. They turned it upside down and breathed fire into it, drawing Sam out of the control room again, shouting jubilantly, "Hell...that's a pop song now."

The two-sided record was released on July 19, 1954, two weeks after it was recorded.

Both sides were wildly popular in Memphis, prompting Sam to send Elvis out on the road to promote the record. At first they billed themselves as Elvis, Scotty and Bill. Subsequent records identified them as Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys.

Between July 1954 and November 1955, when Sam announced that he had sold Elvis's recording contract to RCA Records, Elvis, Scotty, Bill and drummer D.J. Fontana, who had joined the group in August 1955, recorded eighteen songs in Memphis Recording Service. Not all of the songs were released by Sun Records. Some were carried over and released by RCA Records. Among the standouts were "Mystery Train," which became their first Number 1 hit on the country charts, along with "Good Rockin' Tonight," on the flip side; "That's All Right," which made "Billboard's" Top 10 country list, along with the flip side, "Blue Moon of Kentucky," and "Baby, Let's Play House," which peaked at Number 5 on the "Billboard" charts, along with the flip side, "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone."

In the beginning, Elvis was like a tornado skipping erratically across the musical landscape, his talents raw, wild, and unfocused; but within a short time he was able to rein in his vocals and become a master of both seductive nuance and mesmerizing bursts of energy. Scotty was the perfectionist who worked to find musical counterpoint to Elvis's energetic vocals, setting a new standard for guitarists with his precise musical licks. Bill was the only stage performer in the group, the person who entertained Elvis and showed him how to relate to the public. Working in sync with Bill, D.J. provided the rhythm that transformed high-energy, country-blues selections into rock 'n' roll.

Whether the magic that occurred during the Sun Sessions was an accident, or a logical amalgam of diverse musical talents, will be debated for years. What will not be debated is the immense impact those sessions had on American culture, not just on the genesis of rock 'n' roll, but on American culture itself, setting in motion social and political changes that ultimately redefined America in the eyes of the world.

*James L. Dickerson is co-author of two books with Scotty Moore—“That's Alright Elvis: The Untold Story of Elvis's First Guitarist and Manager, Scotty Moore,” a third person biography that provides a historical perspective on his career, and “Scotty & Elvis: Aboard the Mystery Train,” a first-person memoir that delves into the emotions of his years with Elvis and beyond. Dickerson is also the author of “Mojo Triangle: Birthplace of Country, Blues, Jazz and Rock 'n' Roll,” an award-winning history of the origins of blues, jazz, country music, and rock 'n' roll.*

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