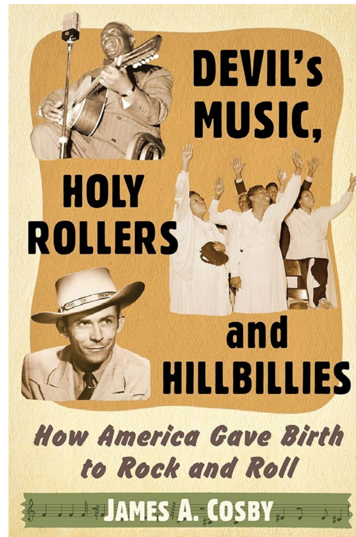
James A. Cosby is the author of the book "Devil's Music, Holy Rollers and Hillbillies: How America Gave Birth to Rock and Roll" (McFarland, 2016). He was interviewed by the Library of Congress on November 12, 2024.



Library of Congress: So my first question is, was there a key moment when you got the idea or the inspiration for this book?

James A. Cosby: I started off doing some reading for pleasure and wasn't even thinking about a book. I was just reading up on Elvis and trying to figure out like, where did this guy come from? what was his story for real?

And what I found out is that, when he got to Memphis, all this stuff was already in place. So, Memphis in the late '40s already was--and by the early '50s--there's already pretty clearly rock and roll records being recorded. These incredible Delta bluesmen are being recorded at Sun Studio. There's incredible gospel music in Memphis. And then the race line was already being broken on the radio, especially with all kinds of amazing radio stations and radio programs going on. So it just blew my mind that all this was happening before Elvis even got there. That's when it started to really click like, "Oh, there's a whole background here that I really want to know more about."

LC: Exactly. What do you think is the most misunderstood part of the evolution of rock?

JC: I'm thinking of really two things and one, yeah, that Elvis didn't really invent [rock], which really doesn't take anything away from him; he was amazing. But there's this whole backstory. I think that you can trace the origins of rock back, really, to the times of slavery, trace the blues and gospel back, and that's when I started the book. Originally, I had no intention of going back to talk about the music of enslaved people; it never occurred to me, but the more I got into it was like, okay, well, you have the blues [and] you can't understand rock without understanding the blues and then you can't understand the blues unless you understand it came right out of slavery.

So that was really wild to me, that you could pretty easily see where [the music] comes right out of those repressive times.

LC: Have the roles of African Americans in the development of the rock genre been regularly diminished?

JC: Yeah, I think in a lot of ways. It's like people not understanding the roots of it. You look at Elvis, he was almost treated like this guy, like, he dropped out of the sky or something, like all of a sudden, holy crap, where did this come from? He was amazing and a great performer and great in so many ways. But, like I said, everything was already in place when he got there…. It's also like what was happening in society at the time in the '50s before rock and roll blew up: you already have James Dean and Marlon Brando, these white guys, young white guys on the big screen, they're telling off white police officers and fighting their parents, like literally fighting their parents. And that's where Elvis got it, he knew he was going to be accepted. He knew he could rebel and be accepted.

LC: Who are some of the great pre-Elvis pioneers that we need to pay homage to?

JC: Oh man, well, I think an obvious one is Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who's really, finally in the last 10 years, gotten a lot of attention after being totally overlooked for a long time. She was a great gospel star in the '30s and '40s.

Then there's the whole Pentecostal influence on rock, which is a whole thing. But [Tharpe] was raised Pentecostal within this wild, energetic music world in their services. And I also realized that, wow, Elvis was raised Pentecostal, too. Then Little Richard was raised Pentecostal. Jerry Lee Lewis, Pentecostal. And that just blew my mind.

So then I came across Sister Rosetta Tharpe, this black Pentecostal singer, and I thought, wow, I wonder if there's any connection between her and Elvis. And it turns out that they all worshiped her. She was Little Richard's favorite singer and Carl Perkins first learned the guitar to a Sister Rosetta Tharpe 's song. So Sister Rosetta Tharpe is one huge pioneer.

LC: So what's with the Pentecostals? What is happening in that church that is giving birth or helping to cultivate so many of these amazing musicians?

JC: That's a whole great wild story. The Pentecostals, or the somewhat pejorative term, the Holy Rollers… There's a passage—I'm going to mess it up--in the Bible about the "whoosh of the Holy Spirit" coming through the parishioners and getting converted and talking about speaking in tongues, and that's where this speaking in tongues comes from. So anyway, fast forward to the 20th century and there's this revival of Pentecostalism, and it's this Holy Spirit, people slain in the Spirit, the Holy Spirit coming through them, this super energetic music that all goes together and they actually included drums and guitars in service. So, yeah, it's just a really wild history of Pentecostalism and it just dovetails with the start of rock and roll.

LC: Besides Sister Rosetta, who are some of the other great pioneers we need to mention?

JC: There's a couple people in particular. Let's see… so there's a guy named Goree Carter, he's from Texas. And in '49, he recorded a song called "Rock Awhile," and you really hear this opening guitar riff, and it's pretty clearly sort of a template for Chuck Berry and "Johnny B. Goode."

That was '49. It's like… that sounds a lot like rock and roll to me. So that's one guy. There's a whole bunch in the early '50s. There's also, oh God, Ike Turner. And it was his band that in '51 that recorded the first the song that has the consensus of being the "first rock record." ["Rocket '88"] which is somewhat known, but problematic because he is such a controversial guy.

LC: Since these men and women were making this music before rock and roll had a name, what genre do we classify them as? Or are they without classification?

JC: Well, as far as commercially, they were known as "race records." Because music was so crazy. Music was segregated. And I mean, officially, formally segregated. And so there were race records, and then there was the idea like, okay, white kids like this [music] too, so why don't we call it something else so we can sell more records? So then it was R&B by the late '40s. They started to call it R&B, and there's an R&B chart from that point on. Then rock and roll comes around later, again, more or less to sell records. Alan Freed in Cleveland calls it "rock."…

And one more thing on that, also in the late '40s, it's funny, there's all these songs with this really strong beat and sort of often somewhat risqué lyrics sometimes. And there's a line in "Billboard" magazine around like '48 or '49, that reads, This is like the umpteenth record like this with this strong beat with the word 'rock' in the title."

It's hard to define exactly what rock and roll is in terms of the exact first record, but there's like a whole movement going in the late '40s. I called it the "First Rock era."

LC: What surprised you the most in researching and writing this book?

JC: I think one of the reasons why I got into it is I I've listened to rock and roll my whole life, and I really didn't know how it started really. And I had such a vague idea that, well, there were these bluesmen, these black guys who were treated bad in the south, and they made blues music, and then Elvis came along. That's all I really knew. And so just to realize there's a whole backstory, like how this happened and how this came together is fascinating. And also, when you see all these threads-- there's country, there's blues and gospel, and it's almost like they're all on a collision course. And that's like really inspiring in a way. It was all-- you can sort of see it slowly moving toward the end. It was a collision course.

LC: Who were some of the primary country artists that helped pave the way?

JC: Well, you go back to Jimmy Rogers in the '20s and '30s. He was sort of the father of modern country music. He really brought a lot of blues influence and some jazz influence into it. And he really was sort of the heart and soul of country music going forward. So he's a huge part of the story. He really incorporated all these other different influences, the blues and jazz. And he traveled around a lot in the South. So he got a lot of these influences.

Hank Williams and this honky tonk sound, this sort of rough and tumble with a lot of heart and soul at the same time. And so that was crucial, but, yeah, there's a constant interaction between the blues and country as well.

LC: Did you get the impression with Elvis that he was knowledgeable of where he sprang from and appreciative of it?

JC: Yeah, absolutely. The recent movie, that epic by Baz Luhrmann, a couple years ago now, I think did a pretty good job of showing that. And, yeah, I mean one thing right off the bat people were surprised: he was one of those rare people, or rare white people, where he was born and raised in the rural South so he knew and had a deep knowledge of the blues, even as a young kid. And when he went into Sun Studio, as this 19-year-old kid, Sam Phillips was really shocked he knew all the old blues. And in the early interviews he did, Elvis was pretty quick to credit, acknowledge, where he got it from. It was no secret, he didn't make any secret of it.

LC: That's nice to hear. You just mentioned your playlist. What is on your playlist? Is it mainly music from this transitional period?

JC: Well, this playlist is for my whole book, so it's tracks the whole book basically. But, yeah, I have a whole section where it's like when rock starts, it's hard to pinpoint, like here's right before rock and roll, it doesn't quite sound like rock and roll but it's close. And then there's about 10 songs that probably are rock and roll. It's like this full spectrum, this arc, I guess. It’s interesting.